NINJA NEVER QUIT
A TENTH ANNIVERSARY FANZINE

“I am a child of the eighties. I grew up with films like *Star Wars* and *E.T.* They mean the world to me and still do. To this day, my go-to characters whenever I just want to draw something with no other purpose than to entertain myself are Darth Vader and E.T. That is the foundation on which I am built, and the feeling and joy those films give me will lead my hand for as long as I live.

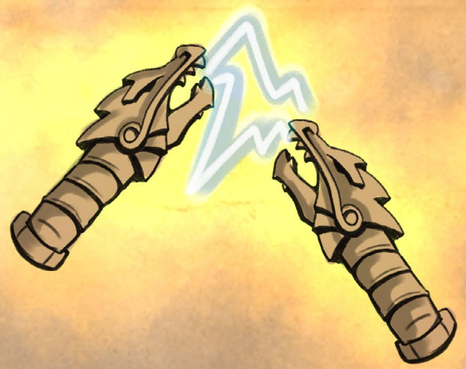
For the last ten years, I have had the joy of watching Ninjago grow and inspire children. I was fortunate enough to be at the right place, with the right people, at the right time, and have the right energy to develop Ninjago back in 2009 and 2010. We always had great ambitions, but none of us ever expected that Ninjago would still be jumping up, kicking back, whipping around, and spinning so many years later.

The children who fell in love with Ninjago when it was first launched have now grown to be adults, and I am constantly awed and amazed by the passion and creativity which is put into interpreting those rather simple ideas we came up with back then. But most of all, I am humbled knowing that to some of those kids, Ninjago means as much as *Star Wars* and *E.T.* do to me.”

~ Tommy Andreasen

“When we were first asked to write Ninjago, we were told it was just going to be one hour of television. Ten years later, it’s still going strong. That’s all because of the fans and we owe them a debt of gratitude. They own quite a bit of real estate in our hearts. Thank you.”

~ The Hagemans



“To me, Ninjago is about friendship. There are fantastical realms, and powers, and bad guys, and adventures — but adventure is meaningless without a friend to share it with. So it all comes back to friendship. It’s a dream we all have — to be part of a group of friends who are so close they become family. And together they confront dangers and go on adventures and try to make the world a better place... I think that’s the magic of Ninjago.”

~ Bragi Schut

“Ninjago fans from around the world, the ten year anniversary mark for the show is a time of celebration and remembrance. I am very honoured and pleased to be part of such a tremendous series beginning in season 8. I have immensely enjoyed watching the work of Jillian and the rest of the cast in the first seven seasons. The creative team starting with Tommy and the incredible talent that makes the show have been very supportive and welcome me into the amazing world of Ninjago with open arms. You, the dedicated fan base have been very gracious to me as well.

You have grown up with this fantastical universe that not only has provided an amazing display of sets, vehicles and characters to build and enjoy but a place and team that manages to share foundational lessons of friendship, loyalty, self-improvement and other positive values within these story lines. With the recent loss of our dear friend Kirby Morrow it is even now more important than ever to remember and cherish these values and strive to embody them in our daily lives. I look forward to continuing this journey with you all. I’m sure as you grow and have children of your own in your lives this wonderful land called Ninjago will continue to thrive in the hearts and imaginations of future generations for as you all know a ninja never quits.
Be well...Sincerely,

~ Sam Vincent

“Lego and ninjas were a winning formula from the beginning. But, it’s the fans that have allowed us to keep this going for over ten years. To all, I am eternally grateful that you keep watching and supporting.”

~ Brent Miller

"I was...lonely up until I joined the Ninjago community and found some friends at school [at] the same time. I associate the two events heavily because they both helped me"
~Vines

"I found some of my closest friends through it"
~Moof

"Ninjago kinda helped me find myself"
~Conk

"...helped me power through a really bad friendship group"
~Leskowitz

"...aggressively nostalgic...it kind of just stuck ever since."
~Annie

"Ninjago made me feel that, no matter how people see me, I need to stay true to myself."
~Riftid Fox

"...it's reminded me that you don't have to be a kid to love a kids' show."
~Anon

"I think it has a little [something] for everybody"
~Limon

"Being lonely is something I struggle with, and seeing [movie] Lloyd have to deal with it as well just...it resonated"
~Peg

"Ninjago is...In simple words...My family."
~Shado

"It reminds me of a simpler time."
~Cricket

"...helped me...come to terms with the side of me that enjoys traditionally 'boy shows'."
~Kalytera

"One may think this is an exaggeration but it's the truth: Ninjago has saved my life"
~Anon

"Ninjago is like a mentor...it was always there and it made me who I am today"
~Snake Jaguar

"It's what introduced me to writing...and meeting some of the coolest people in the world."
~Maggie

"Though I may jump around to different interests, I always find myself returning home to Ninjago."
~Alphonse

"Ninjago opened up a world of wonder, inspiration, creativity, and hope that I never could have imagined before. Its sparked dreams and friendships and love. Because of Ninjago I have a community of people who are like me, and for that I will be forever grateful."
~Yasur

"...it feels really good to just get lost in something I love."
~Lillian

"What Ninjago means to me? Try everything."
~BionicStars

"[Ninjago] makes me feel like I've walked into an old friend's house, where I know I'm welcome and I know every corner and every chip in the wall."
~Jay

"Ninjago let me find my place in my own found family and introduced me to people I hold truly dear. The people I've found within the community have been nothing short of being kind."
~Mikey

"Ninjago kind of means the world to me. I've met some of my greatest friends through the community (they should know who they are) and without them...well I dont think I'd still be here."
~Speedy

Ninja Never Quit: A 10th Anniversary Fanzine is dedicated to the legendary Kirby Morrow, who sadly passed away this past year. It is with heavy hearts that we thank him for being an integral part of our lives and childhoods.

Thank You Kirby Morrow

(Wyd) Ninja Melissa Julien

To Kirby: thank you for all of the amazing memories. Words cannot describe what you meant to us. We miss you and love you more than you'll ever know.

teddytedbert

Ninjas and Coffee

I owe you my childhood when I made the wish I am today. Thank you

Sayjo

Thank you for everything

LUVAISANARTIST

CJ20

STARSHIP152

2020

We love you Kirby! You mean so much to us, and we will never forget that.

-Akuma Zen

To Kirby, Thank you for all the memories. Lots of love, Brandon

YaSuyo

Speedy

to Kirby, with ♡ -HIK /Nines

Ninja Never Quit
So Neither Will We
Thank you for everything, Kirby.

BionicStars

SNimbus Javy

Kurinhyi

JAIRA AT SUNDOWN
Thank you for everything, Kirby
Rest in Peace

Thank you, Kirby.
NEONJAYS

LoraB

@AlfreedomV

SPINTRICKY
SPINSHIP
MICHAEL

Leskowitz
Leskowitz

Katia T.
Thank you for everything ♡

beats!

SOLOBODOR

Your Legacy unforgettable, gone but never forgotten
We Miss you Kirby.
Gla (Guardian Sorceress Alanshee)

Moof
- Thank you for voicing my childhood, Kirby. You will be missed

AW
♡ Thank you for everything, Kirby. Rest easy. ♡
-Arcade

Neko Rina

icedcreamx

Ninjago x Art/Romi

Joshua Rook 2020

The Ultimate Ultimate Weapon /TUWArt

MINNOW
minn

Thank you for everything, Kirby. We all will miss you
-R (vesper)

CStatic

ARI

@butterflyloweeye
thank you for everything ♡

PALPEKJ

The Ultimate Ultimate Weapon /TUWArt

Thank you, for voicing our childhood
-

CAP
sir-incarcat

Ninja never quit!

Thank you for everything you have done over the years, both in Ninjago and other voice-acting projects. You are loved and appreciated for the incredible, hard-working person that you are.
You loss is devastating and you will be so missed.
May you rest easy, Kirby.
- Abc

Mar

Until we meet again
- SHADOW

Ringneo
You brought so many soo much happiness -thank you!
-Fabro-

Glitched Fox
thank you for everything.

Thank you for everything. May you rest in peace. ♡
- Angela Rojas @thatmoonjo

ninjawhoa

GieRoSajie

kayyeh1

Sending love to his family & loved ones,
Moxie

UnknownSigils
Liam

BK

Thank you for so many years of entertainment
- DiveAmongAngels

Thank you for all the memories, Mr. Morrow.
You were a big part of my childhood.
Though we never met, you will always be in my heart.

sensei-wus-beard

Welcome to Ninja Never Quit: A 10th Anniversary Fanzine!

This free-to-view PDF features over 100 different fan-creators – from artists, to writers, to cosplayers – who all came together to produce this tribute for the 10th anniversary of Ninjago: Masters of Spinjitzu. It was a long journey for all of us since the zine has been in production for roughly a whole year, so be sure to send love and support to every contributor for this zine is the product of their hard work.

The zine is interactive and clicking on any piece should take you to the creator's social media page! If this does not work for you, all contributors are listed at the end of the zine on the contributor pages.

We allowed contributors to submit non-canon content, so some contributors decided to submit a piece dedicated to their favorite ship or AU (alternate universe/timeline)! We tried to allow creators creative freedom for their pieces so they could celebrate the anniversary in their own way.

We would like to take a moment to thank every single person who helped bring this project to life. Thank you to each contributor who created a piece to be featured in the book. All of your hard work certainly paid off, as each and every piece is absolutely phenomenal, and we were blown away as we put the zine together.

Thank you to each and every person who showed an interest in this project from the very beginning, too! Without you, none of this would have been possible. We had over 230 individuals apply, and while we wish we could have included something from everybody, we knew that wasn't possible. Your interest and support constantly inspired us to try and produce the best zine we could.

And last, but certainly not least, we want to give a big thank you to the entire team behind the show that we all hold dear to our hearts. To the producers, writers, designers, animators, voice actors, and the entire production team: Thank you for all of your hard work over this past decade. Ninjago is a show that has impacted so many of our lives; it is incredibly important to so many of us. And we owe all of that to you.

We would also like to give a *huge* thank you to: Tommy Andreasen, the Hageman Brothers, Bragi Scuht, Brent Miller and Sam Vincent. Who graciously took time out of their day to provide us with a quote to include at the beginning of the zine.

During production, we asked multiple Ninjago fans what the show meant to them, and we included a few specific quotes featured in the beginning pages of the zine! While we couldn't include a quote from everybody, a good majority of fans all shared the same sentiments. Ninjago brought a light to many of these fans' lives, many of whom Ninjago brought joy during their dark hours.

During these past 10 years, as the Ninja and the show grew, we the fans also grew with it. A lot of the children who had fallen in love with the launch of the pilot episodes have now grown into young adults. Ninjago has been with us for a long time, currently standing as Cartoon Network's longest running show still on the air. And that is an incredible feat for these plastic LEGO Ninja that we all hold so close and dear to our hearts.

The mod team is incredibly proud to present the hard work of many of these fans as they come together to celebrate the series' 10th anniversary.

We hope that Ninjago continues to bring fans together, to form friendships and bonds that will hopefully last a very long time. We hope Ninjago continues its incredible long run and inspires children for years to come, the way it has inspired us. And we are sure it will,

Because, *as you all know...*

NINJA NEVER QUIT

A 10TH ANNIVERSARY NINJAGO ZINE

"A Sensei's Lament"

Darcpython

How much loss can one person take before it is considered a curse?

With everything I was given from the start I should have had everything going for me. I am a son of the First Spinjitzu Master. I was born into a legendary bloodline. Everyone told me I was destined for greatness.

I don't remember my mother. It was Garmadon that taught me about her. He only had one or two clear memories of her, or at least that's what he told me. My father almost never discussed her, and if he did, it was always in passing. That my mother gave this to him, my mother was involved in this event, it was never anything about her personality or interests. Father once did say that my love for tea was inherited from her, and a statement as simple as that was out of the ordinary. That's all I knew about my mother. That she liked tea. I could never miss her, because I never really knew her or anything about her. My father and my brother were missing the presence of a unique person in their lives. I never knew that unique person, so I could never miss her. I could feel the absence of a mother figure, the absence of her.

Garmadon and Misako found many of her recordings, and I am mentioned in zero of them. There are a couple, written toward the end of her life, that mention how excited she is to have a second baby, but I am never named. And they stop before the second child is born. I now assume it was childbirth or complications afterwards, but I still do not understand why my Father was unable to tell me or Garmadon this. I would have understood.

My father announced he was ready to die the day after he told me I was ready to be on my own. This I never understood. He had to have been sick, I'm not sure with what, he never gave me or Garmadon an answer. I thought a man that powerful and well-known was unstoppable. He was distant towards the end of his life, something that Garmadon had pointed out to me, but I never took seriously. I knew respected Father, unlike him. If there ever was a man that could triumph over mortality, it was him. Unfortunately, like any man, he succumbed to his inevitable end. He had come to terms with his end, but I had not.

Father's dying wish was for his two sons to respect each other, and to honor his legacy, fulfilling his role as the guardians of Ninjago. I failed his last wish. I can no longer respect Garmadon, and Ninjago is on the brink of ruin. He raised us to be strong and proud men, and part of me is relieved that passed before his last wish fell apart.

The few months after Father's death were a time of complicated emotions, though I found myself content more often than not. I missed him dearly. Ninjago seemed to love on without him, which brought me some comfort, though it slightly confused me. The leadership role that was my destiny was within reach. I was not yet a leader, but I was a teacher. A teacher to my greatest regret.

Morro, who, much like me, was told he was destined for greatness, was my biggest failure in life. He was not a failure, he was one of the best things to ever happen to me. Rather, it was my role as his mentor that I failed at. Actions that I regret even more than my failure to live up to my family legacy.

I tried my best to tell him about his power. I was certain he was the chosen one, no elemental master had accomplished what he did at such a young age. I thought Morro would be overjoyed at such an honor. In reality, it destroyed him. After all the great things I said about his ability, and after time and time again telling him he was special, the weapons did not react.

Morro would spend hours beating himself up if he did one thing wrong no matter how much I tried to talk him out of it. He said that destiny was wrong. He claimed I was never proud of him. As he grew older, we drifted apart, which I figured was normal for a teenage boy. Garmadon was quite similar around that age. Garmadon was quite similar to Morro in many ways, more than I'd ever like to admit. The most dreadful similarity was the dark path their lives became. And no matter how much I tried to stop both of them from venturing further, the path only escalated, they became lost.

His body was never found.

My dear friend Ray, the closest friend I had, was my go-to emotional support during these times. He was there for me no matter what happened, no matter how at fault I was. He was the hero I always wanted to be. He acted much more like a leader than I ever did, and he was a brave soul.We both had sacrificed years of normalcy for the greater good of Ninjago. After the war ended, Ray still fought every single day to protect those he cared about. He, Lilly, and Misako were the only three people that knew the truth about Garmadon's second accident. It was not long after that second accident that Ray and his wife disappeared completely out of the blue, like Morro, except they have yet to be declared dead. It was assumed to be abduction. It was cared about for a few months, then quickly forgotten by the general public, including the few remaining elemental masters. I never forgot. Their two children would never forget. They were left alone.

I was the one Ray trusted to take care of his children, in the worst case scenario. I failed him. I was surprised that he still trusted me to take care of his children after what happened to Morro. I did not trust myself. It's been a decade since their kidnapping, and I have yet to ever visit the home again, the young toddlers now teenagers.

Garmadon was rarely around during these times. Mother's death affected him much more than me; as brothers, we shared nearly everything, except for memories of our mother. Father seemed to be a relief for him. Garmadon did not listen to his final wish whatsoever. We went on a few adventures together, and then he left. He was brought back by war, but as soon as he wasn't obligated to stay, he was gone.

He always blamed me for his first accident. I blamed myself too. It was my idea to play with real katanas that day, and it was I that refused to take responsibility for my actions. My older brother was my role model, and seeing him bedridden should not have been real life. Children are supposed to be playing outside with their friends, not screaming in pain for months on end. Miraculously, after years of determination, he was able to recover physically, nearly as fully functioning as he was before the bite. While he had good days and bad days, his bad days were the norm for what seemed like his entire childhood. His mind was never the same. Maybe part of that was because of the venom, maybe it was because he was never given a transition period to grow up. It is one of the mysteries of my life, the brother I was supposed to have but

never got. Even long into adulthood, he still resented me, and I did not see a need to help him. I thought he was fine in his life. He had Misako and he had the freedom he always dreamed of. They even had a child of their own. The few times we met after the war, he seemed happy.

Then, one fateful day, I saw Garmadon in the monastery. Garmadon's body was in the monastery. He was not there. I knew he still had problems, but I underestimated how severe they had become. Misako probably did not want me to know how broken his mind was now.
I was lucky to make it out alive. I thought I could never hurt him, but I did. I did not kill him. It was an act of self-defense. He was threatening my life, and was threatening all of Ninjago itself. He knew the consequences of the power of the golden weapons, and he paid the price. Yet, I still felt guilty.

I was always told I was destined for greatness. He was always told he was destined for doom.

I don't blame Misako for cutting me off. She may have truly loved him, and she was one of the few people he didn't seem to hate. I knew little about their relationship, as Garmadon did not talk to me and Misako and I only discussed history and politics. She never seemed to be worried about her husband, so seeing her as an absolute wreck after Garmadon's breakdown was disturbing. The day of his second accident, she found me lying on the floor. I was in a state of absolute shock, almost unable to comprehend what I just did to my own brother. Misako, holding an infant child in her arms, was in hysteria, frantically asking me if I saw Garmadon anywhere. When I told her what happened, she collapsed. When she awoke, she told me that she knew this was going to happen since the moment she fell in love with him, but just wished it wasn't now. They had a baby now. He was born perfectly healthy, with his father still around. Last time I saw him, he was still a healthy kid, but without a father. I always wanted a family, but it never worked out. My brother was forever robbed of that chance. Maybe he would find his way back to normal one day, but for now, his state was unknown. Misako did not blame me entirely, for which I was grateful, but knew she was wrong.

Misako lived with me after Lloyd was born, so she could continue working while I helped out with the baby. Morro was the closest I had to a son, but that was decades ago, with a tragic end. Here I was again, attempting to raise another child, who already had a tragic beginning. Was I ever a father to Morro, as I was the only caretaker he had ever known? Did that role cease the moment he died? Was Garmadon still a father, even though his child will never remember the real him?

A few years later, Misako left with Lloyd. The note said she had intense work to do, and Lloyd would be sent to a school. I did not bother to go after them. Maybe Garmadon had told her the ultimate fate of Morro and she was afraid her son would have that same fate. Maybe she finally knew how responsible I was for everything. Her husband was sick his whole life because of me. Her child would grow up fatherless, because of me. Her family would forever be broken, because of me.

I had long quit being a teacher by this point. I stopped after Morro died. My students deserved to learn how to fight from someone that was able to get through an entire training session without breaking down. In hindsight, it was for the best that I quit. I previously had never thought about going back. I was in a place of too much emptiness to ever fulfill Father's wish now. Lilly was disappointed, but sympathetic. She wanted to continue training students with me, but had decided to settle into her own life after I quit. She was enjoying a life I always envisioned myself in. She was passionately singing, fulfilling her family tradition of music professions. She was happily married to a fellow musician, and had a lively and beautiful son.

Lilly was my closest friend behind Ray. I thought of her as my younger sister, she was much more of a sibling to me than Garmadon ever was. In almost every battle since the alliance was disbanded, she fought by my side. Skulkin had come to the land in the name of my brother, and we defended Ninjago together. I was terrified I was going to lose her, I had lost everyone else in my life. After Misako and Lloyd went their separate ways, she was all I had left.

I should have expected her to get sick. Anyone that I had ever loved met a tragic end. I loved her, so it was only fitting that she would soon be gone.

I am not as old as I may seem. And I have outlived nearly everyone I've ever loved. Yet, I remain.

Luck was in my favor for two chapters of my life. The beginning, where I was given everything needed for a successful, fulfilling life. I am lucky now too, because I still have one thing left. I have time.

I have done many things I regret, countless things. There is nothing I can do now that will let me undo those actions. I can either continue living a life consumed by failure and regret, or I can continue living.

I will continue living for Mother, who was excited to bring me to this world.

I will continue living for Father, and honor his legacy.

I will continue living for Morro, so I can someday tell him in another world how proud of him I was.

I will continue living for Ray, and hope that his mystery will be solved one day.

I will continue living for my Garmadon, to see him defeat the odds again.

I will continue living for Misako, to let her know how thankful I was to see my brother filled with joy.

I will continue living for Lloyd, so I can one day tell him how his father was once my role model in life.

I will continue living for Lilly, to fulfill her dying wish.

I will be a leader. I will be the leader of my own life, and that life is not over yet. No matter how much more failure and loss is in the future, I will keep living.

I sit on the steps of the monastery. The sky is clear. They are watching. I drink the tea Mystake gave me. Alone doesn't seem as lonely right now.

Tomorrow, I will head to the mountains.

-What *is* fair? That's faith.

A. Novella

biggerings

“*The Beginning*”

Lolo

Dark clouds rolled over the sky as the sun fell below the horizon. A young girl with a bob of dark hair, dimples on her smiling cheeks and soft blue eyes, waved to the shop owner, not noticing their pitying expression as she left. She trudged up the hill to their smithy, the heavy bags over her shoulder bouncing against her back. The cooling wind sent loose strands across her face, tickling her cheeks.

As she walked closer to the smithy, heavy metallic bangs echoed down the hill. Her brother, hard at work, making swords that they could sell. She entered the smithy and was greeted by a frustrated groan. “Hello to you too,” she joked, dropping her bags down as she walked into the forge.

Her brother turned to her, his face dripping with sweat and his usually bright brown eyes dull. He held up a bent sword, scrutinising the twisted metal. “Oh, hey Nya,” he said absentmindedly, wiping his forehead. “I did everything right this time and it still didn’t work!” He threw the sword into a corner. It clattered on top of other twisted and broken weapons, reminders of his failures.

A hand on his shoulder pulled him out of his thoughts. “Kai, you have to be patient. Remember what father always said?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he sighed, “‘No matter how much fire you have, experience isn’t something you learn overnight.’” He pulled out one of the scrapped weapons and began melting it down. “I will become an amazing blacksmith Nya, better than dad ever was.”

Nya moved next to him, helping keep the forge alive. She leaned over and wrapped one arm over his shoulders, “I know you will,” she whispered.

A gentle clack on the stone floors alerted the siblings to a customer. They turned to see an elderly man holding a tall staff, a wide straw hat covering his eyes and a wrinkled hand stroking his long beard.

“Hm, your metal is heavy and loud. Good for a samurai but…” the man lifted his head, revealing shiny golden eyes, “Nothing for a ninja?”

Kai glared at the man, watching him walk around their store, inspecting the armour and weapons. He slammed his hand down on the anvil to grab his attention.

“Hey, the store’s called Four Weapons, not for browsing,” he moved closer so he was standing in front of the man, “Either buy something, or get out.”

“Kai—” Nya began, but the old man cut her off.

“Hmm, I thought I’d find something special here,” he turned on his heel and walked to the entrance, “Apparently not.” He tipped his hat towards them and left, disappearing into the darkening hills.

The siblings watched him go, confusion clouding their features.

“That was rude Kai,” Nya began, walking towards her shopping.

He shrugged and started putting away his tools. His thoughts kept wandering back to the old man, something about him felt familiar but he couldn’t place it. He huffed, staring at the armour hanging on the wall. While most of them had been made by his parents years ago, a few were his handiwork, with Nya’s design and help of course. There was nothing wrong with samurai, who even cared about ninja anyway.

A loud revving brought the siblings to the entrance of their home. They glanced at each other with fearful eyes. Not many people had vehicles that sounded like that.

Smoke rose from behind a hill, drawing their attention as the revving grew louder. A large monster truck, adorned with a large skull and chains, burst over the crest. It was followed by several more, each making a beeline towards them.

Kai shoved Nya into the house, “Stay inside!” He yelled, grabbing the nearest armour and dragging it on, loosely tying it on in his rush.

“Kai-!” Nya tried to grab a weapon, but Kai pushed her further inside.

“Stay inside Nya!” He commanded, grabbing a sword for himself and rushing back outside.

An army of skeletons surrounded their home, each armed with an array of sharp swords, axes and spears made of bone. Kai stood at the entrance to the shop, holding his sword up in shaky hands. He would defend his home, his sister, no matter what.

With a loud cry, he charged the crowd of skeletons, swinging his sword with all his strength behind it. The sword collided with the sword of a skeleton, its heavy weight throwing Kai off balance. He barrelled forwards, following the weight of his sword, ducking and dodging the attacks of the skeleton. Heavy strikes knocked his around, his armour clattering with each blow. Every part of his body ached, but he couldn’t stop, he couldn’t give up.

He glanced around, realising with horror that the skeletons had him surrounded. They began to close in, shrinking the circle, their manic grins and wide eyes sending shivers down his spine.

A clattering to his left drew his attention, the skeletons parting as a flurry of swords and spinning axes carved a path through them. Nya leapt through them, landing next to Kai and pivoting on her feet so they were back to back.

“Nya!” Kai cried, glancing over his shoulder to look at her, “I told you to stay inside!” She met his eyes and glared, her dark brown eyes fiery, “And let you fight them all alone? Not a chance.” She wiped at her face, blood streaming from a cut on her cheek. “Let’s do this,” she said, her determination clear.

He wanted to force her back but, at least she was here. They shared a battle cry and leapt into the fray, reinvigorated by each other's presence.

Kai forced his way through the crowd, swinging his sword wildly to keep the skeletons back. He took the direct route straight to their vehicles, maybe there was something he could do to get them all to leave.

Another skeleton landed in front of him, sending his flying backwards onto the ground. It stood, towering over him, its glowing red eyes far larger than any of the other skeletons he'd fought. Kai tried to steady his breathing and stood, knuckles white as he gripped his sword in front of him.

The skeleton smirked, holding up two knives in its arms and raising them, revealing two more arms each with its own blade.

Kai swallowed, fear flashing across his face. He tightened his grip on his sword. So what if the skeleton had extra arms, he could do this. He had to do this.

With his sword held high, Kai leapt into the fray, swinging his weapon wildly at the skeletons all around him. Their bone weapons clanged against his armour and his sword but he didn't let that stop him. He had to protect his home, he had to protect Nya.

"Sup bro," Nya said, taking off a nearby skeleton's head with her own sword.

"Hey," he said, glancing over his left shoulder and taking a swing at another approaching skeleton. He paused, his head swinging back to Nya, "Hey! I told you to wait inside!"

Nya scoffed, grunting as she blocked an attack, "As if I'd let you have all the fun!"

He wanted to protest, to tell her to get back inside, but there was no time. No way to get through the crowd of skeletons. They'd have to fight their way to freedom, together.

Back to back, they fought. Their swords swinging at the skeletons who dared approached them. Although they were outnumbered, the skeletons weren't very smart and were easier to push back than either of them expected.

They kept pushing through, carving a path through the skeletons with relative ease. Kai was grateful for his armour and the protection it offered against the many blows that got past his guard, and was equally grateful that Nya had decided to wear armour of her own to protect her.

He caught sight of the four armed skeleton, the obvious leader, hanging back from the battle. There was no way he'd let that dumb skeleton get away with atacking his home.

Kai charged forward, sparing a single glance back over his shoulder to make sure Nya was still okay. He cut through the skeletons on a direct path to the skeleton leader, a gutteral battle cry bursting from within. He would make that skeleton pay, he would make them all pay.

The skeleton was waiting for him, catching his sword and blocking it with one of its knives. Kai twisted the sword around, aiming for another fatal strike but it was deflected again. The skeleton had a smirk on its face, a cruel smile. Kai was no match for its skill, and they both knew it. Not that it stopped him. Nothing would.

He kept attacking, his strikes dissolving into a berserker-like rage, each blow an extension of his anger at the skeletons but not a single one made any dent in the skeleton's defense.

"I grow tired of this boy," it said, the smirk on its face never faltering, "Enough is enough."

The skeleton moved faster than Kai expected, sliding past his sword and smashing it from his hands, sending it flying across the field. Unarmed but undeterred, Kai swung around to face the skeleton with his fists up, ready to punch out the monster but the skeleton was already one step again.

It shoved him, knives slashing at his chest and knocking him backwards. He slammed into the water tower, the weak wood creaking and cracking from the force. It backed away, cackling, as the water tower groaned and crumbled, the water splashing right onto him.

He stared up at the cascading water, his entire body frozen with fear. The water tower was going to crush him. He was going to die.

A swirl of bright colours surrounded him, like the midday sun sparkling around him. His whole body felt lighter than air, trapped in the middle of this tornado of light. He wondered briefly if this was what death felt like, whether he'd finally get the chance to see his parents again. He really hoped that Nya would be okay.

The tornado disappeared, revealing his surroundings to be the hillside his home resided on, still surrounded by skeleton warriors. He blinked, swinging his head around to see the old man standing in front of the four-armed skeleton.

"Your spinjitzu looks rusty Wu," the skeleton taunted, all its knives drawn and aimed at Wu.

Wu, that must be the old man's name, jabbed his staff towards the skeleton. "Nothing like bone to sharpen its edge."

They leapt into battle, moving so fast Kai couldn't keep track. At one point, it looked like the skeleton, Samukai, had the upper hand, about to deliver a fatal strike to the old man's side but then he spun, his stick knocking the knife aside and the fighting continued. Nya approached from the other side, the entire battle paused as the lead skeleton and the old man fought hard. They shared a wordless glance, letting each other know they were okay.

The old man, Wu, slammed his staff into the skeleton, sending it flying back into the army. "Give up, Samukai," he said, "This fight is over."

Samukai frowned, glaring at Wu. He looked around at the army, head tilted upwards. "Lord Garmadon says take the girl!" Samukai shouted, waving one arm and retreating into the skeleton army to their vehicles.

Kai's head swung towards their vehicles, his eyes catching the fast moving claw shooting towards them. He wanted to leap in front, push Nya away, but he was too slow, too far away, his samurai armour heavy and clunky. He could only watch in horror as the claw wrapped around Nya, her sword clattering to the ground with a cry. He let his own sword fall and reached out, his face mirroring the fear on Nya's face as she flew back towards the skeleton's vehicle.

“No!!” He cried as the skeletons revved their vehicles and spun around, covering his surroundings in heavy smoke. “NYA!!!”

Wu frowned at the retreating skeletons. He turned a disappointing stare onto Kai. “As I said, useless,” he sighed, tapping Kai’s armour with his staff.

Kai brushed it aside, poking him in his chest. “You! Why didn’t you do anything?” He yelled, turning his frustrations onto Wu, “You could’ve used your twist-itzu or your—”

“It’s called Spinjitzu!” Wu interrupted, “And I’m sorry about your sister but—”

“But nothing!” Kai fumed, shrugging off the heavy armour and letting it clatter to the ground, “I am going after her and you can either help, or stay out of my way!”

He stormed off, but Wu grabbed his shoulder, turning him back around. He ignored Kai’s angry glare and continued, “Where she has gone, no mortal can follow. Certainly not you,” he let go of Kai, glad to see that he stayed still, “But, I see great potential in you, the potential to be one of the greatest ninja to ever live.” Wu turned away, glancing back over his shoulder as he spoke, “Come with me, and I can teach you spinjitzu.”

Kai glared at the old man. He was frustrated, more than frustrated even, that the sensei refused to help him. But, Kai looked over the hills in the direction the skeletons had fled, he was probably right. With a huff, Kai followed Wu, stomping his feet as he approached, “Fine old man, you win. I’ll come with you.”

Wu smiled from underneath his hat, “Excellent, then let us begin.”

Yasuo

NEONJAYS

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"Pythor's resolve"

Melissa18999

Pythor hated the light. It crept from the cracks in the ceiling of his tomb. It represented everything he had been denied, everything that had been stolen from him. He often wondered if the other serpentine tribes' tombs dangled freedom in front of their faces on a daily basis. He'd long given up trying to break down the door. He knew he had to conserve his strength. After all,

He was the last anacondrai.

The once mighty tribe that managed to turn the tide of the war, was reduced to a single frail snake. He was going to die there, just like the rest of his people. All because of those humans, the elemental masters. All serpentine begged for mercy but the masters didn't care. They used their flutes to herd the tribes into tombs, not even hiding their long term plan for the snakes by calling it a prison. They even sent the strongest to the cursed realm to suffer for all eternity. The elemental masters were going to wipe the serpentine from the face of ninjago. All because the snakes wanted to protect what was theirs.

Pythor remembered, during the war, one of the older Constrictai telling him and others stories of their past, some more fiction than fact. But one stuck out to him. The Great Devourer. The strongest of all the serpentine. Their god that would consume all of ninjago if the serpentine tribes ever decided to release it. The elder was weary of the snake, warning Pythor it was a dangerous force of nature that the serpentine had locked away for a reason. Consuming all of ninjago meant the serpentine would join the rest of them.

Pythor didn't care.

He wanted revenge. He saw himself in the beast of legend. Locked away by those who feared their power. Left to rot and be forgotten by the world. Driven mad by an insatiable hunger, even willing to consume its own to survive.

Pythor made a vow.

"I do not care about rebuilding the serpentine. My tribe will die with me and I care little for the others. That said, if I do escape, I will unite them, and resurrect the Great Devourer myself. Then all of ninjago will know the pain, agony, and fear, that they forced the Anacondrai to endure! Only I suppose, it won't last nearly as long. But a snake will rule this realm, and the humans will be erased as if they never existed."

As if an answer to his wish, Pythor heard a new noise. An unlocking sound. The door to his tomb cracked open. The light was blinding, and Pythor nearly forgot to camouflage. Once his eyes adjusted though, he saw a small human child clad in black except for the painted ribs and a green number 5 on his sweatshirt. Was this his rescuer? A human child? Pythor wouldn't believe it, there was no chance the humans realized their mistake. Even if they did, it was too little too late. It would not effect his plans.

Despite sneaking up on the boy, Pythor managed to earn his trust relatively easily. Once the boy revealed his name to be Floyd Garmadon it all made sense. Only a child outcast would be naive and desperate enough to turn to the serpentine for aid. A child with no true understanding of right and wrong, being told a false history of the war his whole life, seeing the serpentine as pure evil. While the same time, The boy was unaware of his own family's role in their near extinction.

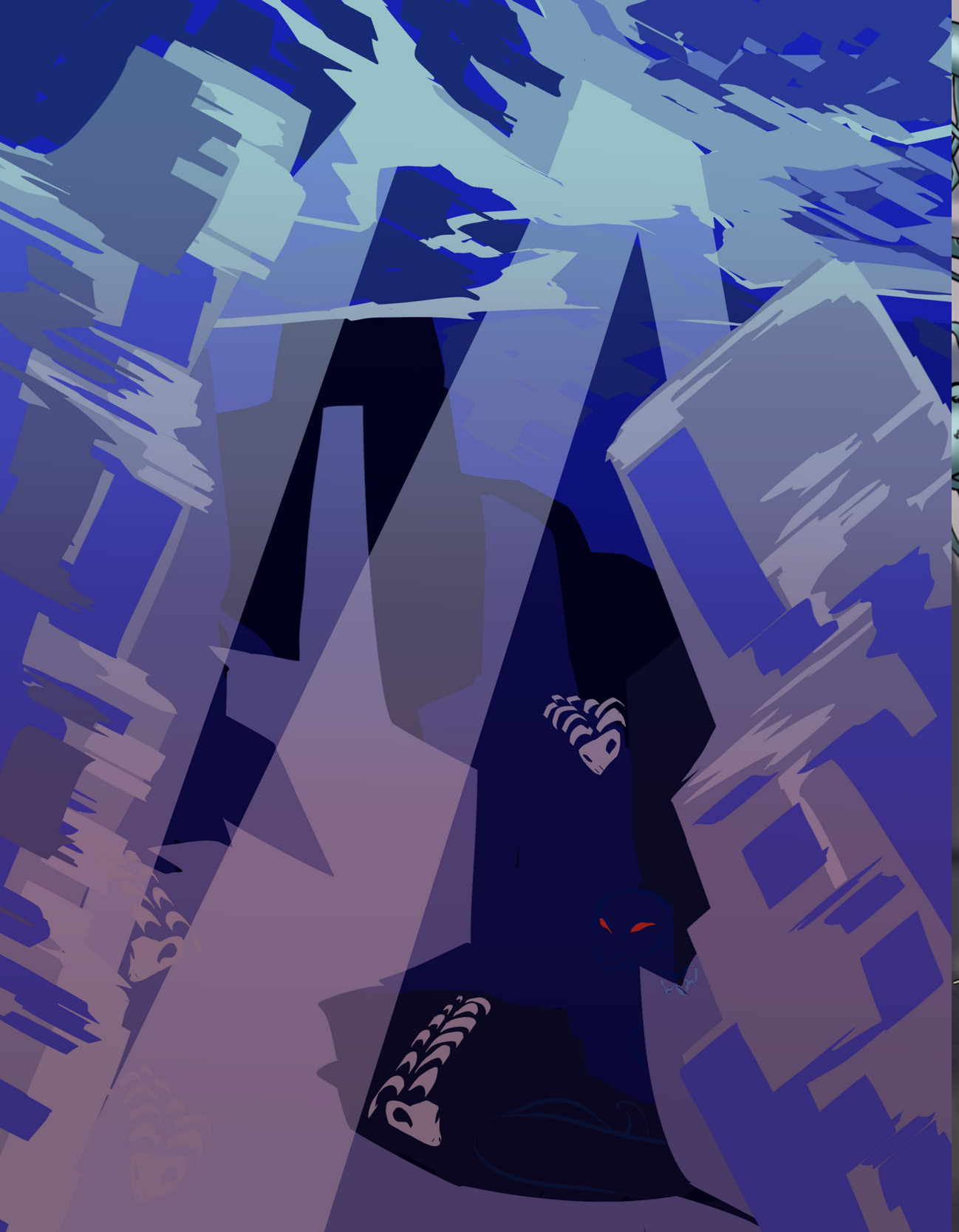
Pythor decided he would use Garmadon's son to help unite the tribes, and make an example of the boy. To show the cowardly Lord Garmadon how it feels to lose it all.
When his own son would be the first fed to the Great Devourer.

"You know Floyd..." Pythor started.

"It's Lloyd." Lloyd corrected.

"Whatever." Pythor continued. "I believe this is the start to a beautiful friendship."

TICK TOCK



“*Under the Stars*”

Vesper Rose

Jay is happy that they finally got the bounty back from Garmadon and those snakes. Now they can properly start training Lloyd! Not in Dareths dojo, as... interesting as Dareth is. Or in that dingy old apartment, they were staying in for the time being.

Something he’s going to miss is sharing a bed with Zane, though.

“We can still always share one,” he says with a shrug. Waiting for the milk to boil in the kettle so they can have hot chocolate.

“I know.” Jay leans against the counter, it’s their first official date, and they’re going to spend it under the stars in the sky on the deck of the bounty. “At least the beds will be more comfortable.”

Zane chuckles, “yes, they will be.”

They spent a while cleaning it up and refurbishing it back to its former glory after Garmadon and the serpentine have been living in it for a while. The mess wasn’t too bad, but there still was some mess left behind from the snakes.

Zane gets down a couple of mugs out of the cabinet for the two of them. “I don’t think I’ve ever had hot chocolate with milk before?”

Jay gasps, “a travesty. A crime.”

“Oh no, I hope I can pay for my crimes.”

“You will, one day.”

“Gross! Stop flirting!” Lloyd whines at the kitchen door.

“Hey kiddo, what’s up? Need anything?” Jay asks.

“I was just coming to maybe get a snack, and you two are in here being gross!” the young green ninja says with disgust in his voice.

“You can have some crackers. Don’t want you staying up too late,” Zane tells the young boy. This makes Lloyd whine again. “Fine.” he mumbles, watching as the white ninja gets down a bowl and the box of Tritz crackers, putting a few in the bowl and handing it to him, “thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now go bother Kai.”

Lloyd cackles, “if he complains about it, I’m going to tell him you sent me.” he says as he walks out the door.

“That’s fine.”

“Gotta love the kid, even if he can be a little pain in the ass.” Jay grins and gets the hot chocolate packets out of the cabinet.

“Thats true, It’s really hard not to love him now.” Zane smiles back and pulls Jay into a hug, who hums happily.

Wiggling out of Zane’s hold, Jay pours the hot chocolate mixture into the mugs, he grabs a couple of spoons. “Do we have whipped cream?” he asks Zane.

“We should.” the nindroid says and looks into the fridge, “yes, we do.” he puts the whipped cream on the counter. “What else do you want on your hot chocolate?”

“Chocolate syrup? Sprinkles?”

“Now this just sounds like ice cream.” Zane teases. “We have both.”

“We don’t have to use sprinkles. But chocolate syrup is a must.” Jay says taking the chocolate syrup out of his boyfriend’s hands and puts it next to the whipped cream.

“You’re the hot chocolate expert here, so I will follow your lead,” he says, taking the pot off the burner as steam starts to come out of it and pours the milk into the hot chocolate mixture. Jay takes his mug and mixes the hot chocolate and milk together.

Zane watches as Jay puts an ungodly amount of whipped cream on top of his hot chocolate with a raised eyebrow, “that’s a lot of whipped cream.” he says plainly.

Jay shrugs, and before Zane can react, he reaches up and sprays a small amount onto the nindroids nose and cackles.

He blinks, “you’re funny.” he says and wipes it off of his nose with a smile.

Jay laughs again, “do you want some on yours?”

Zane hums, “sure, please don’t put as much whipped cream onto mine as you did to yours.”

“I won’t!” he says and puts a reasonable amount onto Zanes before grabbing the chocolate sauce and putting some onto the whipped cream on both of theirs. “Okay, maybe I put a little too much whipped cream on mine.” he says with a nervous laugh as some whipped cream drips down the sides of his mug.

“I said it was a lot.” Zane says as Jay grumbles and licks some whipped cream off the top. “Would you like a paper towel?” he offers a sheet to his boyfriend, who takes it and wipes the dripping whipped cream off the mug.

“Anyway. Let’s go out onto the deck! I missed just looking up at the sky and seeing the stars! It’s not the same in the city.”

“It isn’t. You can barely see them there.”

“Yeah! And it sucks!” Jay takes his mug and takes a sip and smiles widely.

“I’m assuming its good?”

“Mhm!”

“I am glad.” he takes a sip of his own. “I believe I prefer hot chocolate this way now.” he declares

Jay gives him a wide grin. “Let’s go!” he takes Zanes hand in his and leads him out to the deck of the bounty and sits in the middle of the deck.

“Would you like me to get some blankets and pillows?” Zane asks.

“Sure! It’s a little chilly.”

Zane sets his mug on the ground next to Jay and heads below deck to grab what he needs. Grabbing a couple of pillows from the linen closet along with a couple of blankets. He turns and almost walks directly into Cole.

“Oh- I apologize.”

“It’s cool, things are going well?”

Zane nods, a blush creeping up onto his face, and Cole laughs “I’m taking that as a yes.”

“Y-yeah. I think I might love him. Like a lot.”

“Are you going to tell him tonight? Isn’t it like your first official date or something?”

“I was thinking about it. I don’t know if I should since we have not been dating for very long, and yes, it is our first.” he wants to bury his face into the pillows.

“I mean, I don’t know a lot about romance, it’s not really my strong point being ace, but you can take as long as you want to. I think he would feel the same if you said it.” cole says with a smile, clapping the nindroid on the shoulder.

“Thank you, cole. I must go now. He is waiting for me and my hot chocolate is getting cold.”

He returns to find Jay sitting at the same spot he was before, and even though it’s dark, he can clearly see the look of wonder on his face as he stares up at the night sky. How it lights up when he sees him with pillows and blankets. How much he… loves the blue ninja. He loves him. He loves Jay. He loves Jay with all of his being, his core.

“I was wondering when you were going to appear again,” he says, standing up and putting his hot chocolate on the ground, which he suspects is mostly gone now. “What took you so long?” he takes the pillows and puts them on the ground.

“Yes. I hope it didn’t either,” he says a bit stiffly and nervously. He so desperately wants to tell Jay he loves him right this moment, but it doesn’t seem like it’s the right moment.

Jay gives him a worried look but shakes it off as soon as they both sit down with blankets wrapped around themselves. Comfortably protected against the wind and the cool air.

“My parents would tell me about the stars a lot, we would look at constellations and they would tell me what they knew about them. It was really fun.”

“I was not allowed to leave the tree at night. My father said it was too dangerous.”

“Oh yeah, because of the Tree Horns?”

“Correct.” he takes a sip of his hot chocolate. Still warm, but noticeably colder. “Did you know that the three stars at the top of the sky form a triangle?” he says, “it is called the summer triangle as it is most visible during the summer.” Zane points up to the sky, pointing out the shape and the stars.

“Woah.” jays eyes sparkle, much like the stars do, like lightning during a storm does. “I didn’t know that, that’s cool.”

“Yes, I suppose it is.” he smiles, his power source beats within him a bit faster.
Jay shivers, wrapping the blanket tighter around him. The wind is picking up, making the already cool air turn chilly. Zane wraps an arm around Jay’s shoulders, the blanket hanging over the blue ninja too.

“It’s really pretty, but man is it cold,” he says shivering again, but pressing up against Zane anyway, who probably doesn’t help because he is the ice ninja, and that he himself is also cold. Aside from the fact that he is a robot. But Jay doesn’t seem to mind.

“It… it truly is.”

“You okay?” Jay asks after a moment of silence between the two. “You’ve been acting a little funny since you got back with the blankets.”

“I am fine,” he says, looking away, a blush rising to his face. Is it time to say it?

“Seriously. Is something wrong? Are you not enjoying this? Do you have something wrong with your systems?” jay beings to ramble.

“No, no, no, none of that. I- I don’t know how to-” he pauses, looking back at jay with all the love he can muster, takes a deep breath he doesn’t really need, and ignoring the look of concern on his boyfriends face “I love you.” he says finally.

“Oh- oh! I love you too! I-” he squeaks out in surprise. “Is that why you’ve been acting nervous?”

Zane nods, “I’ve been wanting to say it all day.” his smile returns, pulling jay in for an actual hug.

“I’ve been wanting to do something too, actually. For a while now,” he says, facing Zane and sitting on his knees.

“What is it?”

“Um- close your eyes.”

“Okay.” he closes his eyes.

Suddenly a pair of lips are on his, soft and warm, and a pair of hands cup his face. He opens his eyes just as jay releases him from the kiss. His eyes are wide.

“I’ve been wanting to do that, too.” he laughs.

Jay snorts and leans in for another one, an actual kiss this time.

He tastes like hot chocolate.

It’s nice.

He likes it.

Suddenly the two of them hear somebody *whoop* behind them and somebody shushing. Turning around, Zane sees the rest of the team watching the two of them. Lloyd looks disgusted while Cole sheepishly gives them the thumbs up.

“Kai!” Nya scolds, “you interrupted them!”

“Gross!” Lloyd whines, “why did you drag me out here?”

“Kai wanted to spy on the two lovebirds, that’s why.” Cole says, leading the kid back inside. “I didn’t tell him to do this, by the way!” the earth ninja says as he walks down the stairs.

Zane feels like he should be mad, but he isn’t. He’s just happy that he’s finally told Jay he loves him. Along with the fact that they have had their first kiss.

Though, Jay must’ve looked unhappy because Nya drags Kai below deck, saying that he should apologize later.

Turning his attention back to his boyfriend, he pulls him for a hug.

“Well, that was ruined.” Jay grumbles into Zane’s chest. Listening to the subtle beat of his power core.

“I am sure Nya will have some words with Kai.” Zane says, “and besides, we can always have more.”

“More what?”

He puts a hand under Jay’s chin and gives him another kiss, “more of those.”

Jay laughs, “I love you so much.”

“I love you more.”

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Last Seen April 16th, 2014

:(We ran into some issues

sensei-wus-beard

C'mon Gene, it's a lot more fun than you think.
You can even call it floriculture to make it sound more science-y!

“*Lloyd Tries and Fails to get Tetanus*”

GwenBrightly

Lloyd had never really liked his eyes. Sure, they had come in handy when he was still dedicated to leading a life of villainy and he needed to look scary to keep the other kids from picking on him. But now they reminded him too much of the father he’d never really gotten to know. Of the legacy his family had been cursed with. Of the way his family had been ripped apart as a result of the Great Devourer’s venom.

He really hadn’t expected the Golden Weapons to react to him. After all, he definitely wasn’t Green Ninja material. Kai would have been a much better choice. He had that comforting, protective big brother presence that Lloyd found himself clinging to after all he’d been through in his admittedly short life. And he’d actually *wanted* the title. Unlike Lloyd himself, who would rather hide in a cave for the next decade than fight his father.

It had been a shock. A big one. And even the initial surprise (and terror) of being labeled as the Green Ninja was nothing compared to the way he felt when he glanced in the bathroom mirror early the next morning and noticed that something had changed. His eyes, which had always managed to stay consistent in color up until now, were *green*. Green. Not blue, or brown, or some other color that he could live with while pretending the whole thing had been a sick dream, but green. Inescapable proof of the destiny that had been thrust upon him.

Lloyd’s breath caught in his throat. This couldn’t be happening. It was too much. He scrambled backwards, away from the mirror, and tripped over a snag in the carpet. His elbow bumped against the floor as he fell and he let out a cry of pain. That was going to leave a mark. But that was the least of his problems. He lay on the floor for what felt like hours, unable to rouse himself from the mantra of this can’t be happening that repeated itself over and over in his head. Pathetic.

Creak.... Somewhere on the Bounty, someone moved, causing Lloyd to sit up. If anyone saw him like this... no. The others already worried about him enough as it was. Lloyd couldn’t handle having to talk about this. Not now. There would be too many questions. What if they decided it was a sign that he was meant to fight his father here and now? After all no one else’s eyes had changed colors when they’d discovered their destinies. Well. No one would be able to notice the change if they didn’t see him at all. He’d just have to hide so good that Kai and Nya, and the others, wouldn’t find him.

“You’re fine.” Lloyd told himself quietly as he stood up. It was definitely a lie, but he couldn’t afford to acknowledge that. He crept towards the kitchen — he’d need supplies if he were going to pull off this vanishing act — and tried not to think too hard about anything involving the color green. He already knew exactly where he was going to go; it didn’t take long to snag a box of animal crackers and a bottle of water and make his way down to the engine room.

The motion activated lights flickered on. There, behind some pipes and machinery Lloyd couldn’t name, was his query. The perfect hiding spot. He’d initially discovered the hollow they formed while exploring the Bounty when he’d first arrived, but Nya had called him away before he had the chance to really appreciate it. He crawled and squeezed his way to the furthest depths of the hollow and prepared to settle in for the long haul.

“You look like I feel...” Lloyd dejectedly told the caged lion on the front of his box of animal crackers. And then lights went out and he was left in total darkness.

“Has anyone seen my son?”

Everyone glanced up from their pancakes when the warlord spoke.

“Um, no,” Nya said carefully, “we thought he was still asleep. He’s had a rough few days.”

“That is what I had hoped, but I checked his room just now, and he wasn’t there.” Garmadon stated. He looked worried.

“That’s strange.” commented Kai, frowning. The others nodded. After just narrowly escaping the Serpentine yesterday, they had all assumed he’d want to surround himself with family and forget the experience. Not hide away somewhere.

“Perhaps we should look for him. He’s quite good at getting himself into mischief.” Zane prompted, getting up from the table. Everyone was quick to follow his lead, feeling extra protective of the small boy.

Knowing his habits better than anyone, except maybe Kai, Nya began searching Lloyd’s favorite hiding places. First was the little alcove beneath the steering wheel, then the Bounty’s roof. A few dead leaves drifted lazily on the breeze, a bird screeched in the distance, but Nya found no sign of human life. She called Lloyd’s name several times. There was no response. With a frown, she clambered down from the roof. *Where else would he go?* Neither the training room, where Jay was digging through the cupboards where they stored weapons, nor the living room, where Cole and Kai had pushed the couch away from the wall, yielded any clues to Lloyd’s location. They were running out of places to look.

“He can’t have just... disappeared,” she told her brother, attempting to hide her worry. She collapsed onto the couch while she tried to think of anywhere they might have forgotten to check. Kai sat down next to her and gave her shoulder a squeeze.

“He’s gotta be here somewhere,”Kai agreed, “Lloyd’s not stupid enough to go wandering off on his own again so soon, and I think we can rule out kidnapping — Garmadon said there were no signs of a struggle when he checked Lloyd’s room earlier.”

“That’s promising, I guess.” Nya admitted with a sigh. The small boy wouldn’t have gone anywhere without a fight. Which meant he had to be here. Somewhere. But why couldn’t anyone find him? Why would he hide from them?

“You don’t think he would’ve gone into the engine room by himself, do you?” Kai wondered aloud. Nya stared at him. *Oh.*

“Has anyone checked there yet?” she asked. He shook his head. “Kai, it’s not safe for him down there. There’s all sorts of broken machinery and old pipes, and the lights haven’t been working lately...”

“We need to get down there before he hurts himself.” Kai decided, standing. Nya leapt up behind him, praying they would find Lloyd unharmed. Tetanus shots were the last thing she wanted to deal with.

The walk to the engine room took far less time than it normally would. Kai and Nya sped down the hallway to the stairs before edging their way down into the dark room. Nya powered on the flashlight app on her phone.

“See if you can get the lights to turn on. They usually start working okay if you poke them with abroomstick a few times.” She instructed as she wandered deeper into the engine room to look for Lloyd. Kai grabbed the broom that was leaning against the wall by the stairs and got to work poking the light with a bit more force than was truly necessary. When Nya had made it about halfway across the room, the lights flickered to life. Finally.

Satisfied that the lights weren’t going to go out on them too soon, Kai joined her in looking under and behind the variety of machinery and junk that cluttered the engine room. Together, they hunted for the small boy, certain that he had to be hiding somewhere in this mess. They searched behind the engine itself to no avail. Next, they looked in an old chest. They even pried up a loose floorboard to see if he had somehow gotten himself stuck underneath. Alas, there was nothing there.

“Maybe we were wrong. Maybe he *did* get kidnapped by Pythor or-or-” Nya choked on her words, anxiety mounting. Anything could have happened to Lloyd.

“Nya *stop*.” Kai insisted. He drew her into a side hug. “Maybe the others found him while we were down here.”

She allowed him to guide her back towards the staircase, trying to understand how Lloyd wasn’t where they had been so certain they’d find him. Just as they reached the first step, Nya heard a small voice whisper,

“No. Come back. Please don’t leave me down here.”

“Lloyd!” Nya cried, wrenching free of Kai’s grasp, “Where *are* you?!”

“M’stuck...” came the muffled reply.

“Where?” Kai repeated. There was a rattling in the corner of the room, and Lloyd spoke again.

“Over here behind this... this *whatever* this piece of junk is. The lights went out and I got stuck...”

The siblings glanced at each other and followed the sound of his voice. They could just barely make out his shadowy form inside of the hollow he’d been hiding in. He looked so small, curled in on himself and facing away from them. One of the pipes had toppled over, blocking his way out.

“Oh, Lloyd... what were you *thinking*?” Nya asked softly as she and Kai began tugging away the pipe. She wished he would turn around so she could make sure he wasn’t hurt, but he stayed frozen in place.

“Just get me out of here.” Lloyd begged. The resignation in his voice sliced through the air like the katanas he was always begging to play with.

“Something’s wrong,” Kai stated, saying what they were both thinking. Nya nodded in agreement. Whatever had happened, Lloyd definitely hadn’t come down here for fun. The pipe finally came loose, opening up a path of escape for the small boy. Only, he didn’t move right away. It was almost as if he were trying to avoid them.

“You can come out now.” Kai prompted. Lloyd seemed to pause for a moment before scooting backwards towards them. He shakily made his way out of his hiding place, to the relief of his adoptive siblings.

“Thank you,” he said to the floor. Nya scooped him into a hug. She could feel him beginning to relax.

“Do you have any idea how worried we were?”

“I.... It was stupid, I know.” Lloyd admitted, still not looking at either of them. He tugged his hoodie down to cover his face. *Why was he acting like this?*

“Lloyd, honey, please. Talk to us. What’s wrong?”

Lloyd sniffled. “I don’t wanna talk about it.”

“Okay,” Kai told him slowly, “we don’t have to talk yet. Do you need something to drink? A snack?”

The boy gratefully accepted the bottle of water Kai held out to him. They sat there, together, not saying anything for what felt like an eternity. Nya leaned against the wall while Lloyd quietly sipped his water. Kai hummed absent mindedly. The engine whirred in the background. Eventually, Lloyd sighed.

“It’s my eyes.” He told them so quietly they almost didn’t hear him. Nya blanched.

“Your eyes?”

Lloyd let out a small whimper as he removed his hood and looked at Kai and Nya. “there’s something wrong with them.”

They stared at him in surprise. For the first time, since they had found him, Nya could clearly see his tear streaked face and the source of his distress.

"They're definitely... *different*," Nya began carefully. *Oh, First Spinjzu Master! How was she supposed to handle this?* "but that's not necessarily a bad thing."

"Yeah! There's no reason to freak out." agreed Kai, flashing him a weak smile. Lloyd didn't seem to believe them.

"Guy's. It's because I'm the Green Ninja. Isn't it?"

"It could be." Nya offered. In all honesty, it was the most logical explanation for the striking emerald green color his eyes had taken on. Lloyd's lip trembled.

"And if it is... what if it's a sign? What if the universe wants me to take down my father, like, *right now.*"

Yep, there it was. Nya was pretty sure she had figured out exactly why Lloyd had resorted to hiding down here. He hadn't wanted to be pushed into another hopeless situation. She caught Kai's eye and nodded. Kai turned to Lloyd and asked,

"Can I ask you something, Lloyd?"

Lloyd shrugged, but didn't answer. The master of fire continued anyway.

"When Zane first found his true potential, he started being able to freeze things on command. Do you think we suddenly decided he was the world's most powerful ninja and sent him off on the most dangerous solo missions we could think of?"

"N-no... Of course not."

"What about when Cole started bench pressing twice as much as before?" Nya added, "Or when Jay learned how to charge his cell phone with his elemental powers? Did we push them into situations they weren't ready for?"

Lloyd cringed, clearly not missing the point they were trying to make. He looked back down at his feet and muttered a soft, "*no,*".

"Then why would we treat you any differently?" Kai wanted to know. Lloyd's heat snapped up. His voice wavered as he replied.

"I'm the Green Ninja. It's my destiny to-"

"Screw destiny!" Nya cut him off, frustration filling her voice. She wanted to scream at the unfairness of it all. "You're just a kid, Lloyd! The color of your eyes doesn't get to dictate when you face your father — *you* do!"

It was then that she realized that he was crying. Poor Lloyd. He hadn't even made it a full 24 hours on the Bounty before trauma had struck again. Nya took a deep breath. She gathered Lloyd into another hug before he could protest and began brushing away his tears. Kai joined her, and, together, they held him as he continued to cry.

"We won't let anyone make you do anything you're not ready for." Nya promised, ruffling Lloyd's hair. He didn't say anything, but his breathing began to slow from the near hyperventilating it had been moments before.

"Nope. Why else would we have these cool powers?" Kai added. He winked at the small boy.

"They are pretty cool," Lloyd admitted with a sniffle. As the small boy started to relax, Nya and shared a smile of relief with her brother.

"You're safe with us, kiddo. Always."

NINJA NEVER
QUIT
CONK

"*Observational Astronomy*"

fabro-de-omres

When Nya's born, Kai's constellation gains a star.

He's holding her gently in his arms when a warm feeling, like the warmth of a campfire, starts to glow in his chest. The feeling spreads languidly, wrapping through his limbs and cradling him like a hug. He closes his eyes and lets go, not sure what's happening except that he feels warm and safe and *good*.

"Oh," says his mom, sounding far-away. "Ray, look."

When Kai blinks back to himself, there's a second star twinkling brightly beside his own. The lines connecting the two are faint, like looking at erased pencil marks on his skin. They glimmer when he turns his head just right.

The same two stars wink at him from Nya's skin.

The proper term for what they have is an asterism, but in the modern era people tend to call them clusters. Almost everybody belongs to one- Kai's parents share six stars in a diamond-like pattern on their collarbones, lines the dark-gold of a completed cluster. They say they'll introduce them to their clustermates, but disappear before they get the chance to.

"How many more do you think there are?" Nya asks one day, feet swinging idly as she perches on the workbench.

Kai grunts. "Of what?" he asks, focused more on getting the angle of his hammer *just right* than the actual conversation.

Nya flicks a tiny chunk of slag at him. "Of our cluster, dingus."

"You couldn't have led with that?"

"And not give you something to complain about?" She huffs. "Please. We all know how much you like to whine."

"I'll give *you* something to whine about, once my hands are free-"

"Hmm," cuts in a new voice. "Your metal is loud and heavy, useful to slow one down. Useless in the art of stealth."

The new man is just going gray around his temples, but the way he's leaning on his staff and the good minute he spends berating Kai make him seem far older. "Ha!" he exclaims at the tail of his speech. "Thought I'd find something special here."

Kai wants to tell him exactly what he thinks of that statement. But then the sky blackens and the undead rise and he's too busy fighting to think of anything other than *protect.* This is his parents' home. This is his clustermate. He can't let *anything* happen to them.

The tanks disappear over the horizon, taking Nya with them.

Kai's chest *burns*.

Someone is calling his name. The man from before stands beside him, the one who hassled Kai and then saved his life. "I'm sorry about your sister," he says. "But if you want to save her, you need to come with me."

"And why should I listen to you?" Kai demands, fingers gripping white on the hilt of his sword.

The man is somber as he pulls aside the collar of his shirt. Six stars in a diamond pattern gleam in the fading light. "Because your parents were my clustermates," he says. "You shouldn't have to lose yours so early either."

The man, who tells Kai to call him Sensei Wu, takes him up a mountain to a monastery in the clouds. Kai's eyebrows twitch as he enters the courtyard. Something about this place feels… familiar, even though he's never been here in his life. It feels like coming home after a long trip away.

A blur of blue skids to a stop before Kai.

"Hey, Cole!" hollers the blur, which reveals itself to be a boy with wild red hair and freckles spattered across his skin. "The new kid's here!" He beams at Kai. "Heyo! I'm Jay. Nice to meet you and all that jazz. What's your name?"

"Kai," says Kai. "Wait, who are you?"

Jay's grin grows wider. "We're your new teammates! That's Cole, with the big eyebrows over there-" he gestures to the boy who's just entered the courtyard- "and that's Zane on the roof."

"What's up," says Cole, sending Kai a lazy wave.

"Nice to meet you," says Zane pleasantly, smiling down at him.

What in the world has Kai gotten himself into.

Kai might not be the most observant, but even he can see the divide between Zane and Jay-and-Cole. The latter two are almost never seen without each other. Cole makes breakfast in the morning with Jay clinging to his back. Jay badgers Cole into playing video games even when the other boy is just so *bad* at them.

"You're clustermates?" he asks, examining the two stars dotted on his chest. Zane watches from several feet away, face carefully blank.

"Yep!" says Jay, pulling down his own shirt to reveal a matching pair. "Found out right after I got here! This dummy tripped over air and smashed straight into me."

“Let the record show that Jay was the one who tripped, not me,” says Cole dryly. He obliges Jay as he points out which star is his and which is Cole’s own.

“How many do you have?” Kai asks.

Jay’s face scrunches up. “Five, maybe? It’s hard to know for sure.” He gives Kai an obvious look-over. “And what about you, Mr. Anime Hair? Care to share with the class?”

Cole groans. “Don’t harass the poor guy.”

“Hey! He was asking questions first!”

“I don’t mind,” Kai says, pulling down his own shirt. “These are mine and my sister’s.”

“The one who’s missing?” asks Cole.

“The one who’s kidnapped,” snaps Kai.

Jay pays their conversation no mind. He’s stepped closer to Kai, hand reaching out almost unconsciously.

“Cole,” he says, “look at this. Doesn’t it look like-”

His finger touches his skin.

Kai’s first star felt like being wrapped up in a warm, soft blanket. This feels almost exactly the opposite. Light fizzes through his chest, bubbly like soda and bright like a rainbow, buzzing with excitement and warmth. He feels *light*, like he could almost float away.

Jay lifts his finger. Right where he touched, a new star winks up at them.

“Holy cow,” Jay says, quietly, like he can’t believe his own eyes. “Holy cow! Cole!” He tugs at his own shirt again, glancing wildly between their marks.

“Holy cow,” Cole echoes, eyes wide like a baby deer’s. He stretches out his hand, but draws it back at the last second. “Wait, can I-”

“Yeah,” Kai blurts. He fumbles out his own hand, reaching for Cole’s. “Yeah, you can.”

Their palms touch. Adrenaline surges through Kai’s veins. Cole feels like a challenge, like the rush of satisfaction after perfecting a sword or adding the last stroke to a plate of armor. He feels like Kai could conquer the world as long as they did it side-by-side.

They fall back, panting in unison. Cole’s grin is wide and Kai can’t stop himself, doesn’t want to stop himself, when he feels a matching grin split his own features.

“Wooo-whoooo!” shouts Jay, seizing their hands and pulling them into a circle. “We’re clustermates!”

The warmth in Kai’s chest pulses brightly. He wonders if Nya, wherever she is, can feel it too.

“Congratulations,” says someone softly. Zane stands a short distance away, watching them with a small smile.

Kai extracts himself from the hug. “Zane-” he starts, but the other waves off his attempt.

“It’s alright,” he says, and he doesn’t sound upset. “I’m happy for you all. I’ll let you have a moment of privacy now.”

Jay’s expression as Zane walks off can only be described as torn.

“Is he not-” Kai asks in a whisper, though what other answer is there? Zane’s been here much longer than he has. If he was a part of their cluster, they should have known by now.

Cole shakes his head. “We don’t know.”

“We thought he might be void,” Jay says with an awkward shrug. “‘Cause it only makes sense, right? This?” He gestures between the three of them. “The thing is, I still should have gotten his star even if he was void. But we’ve touched- and *nada.*”

Of course, they find out why months later.

“Guess this explains why you don’t have any stars,” Jay says weakly.

“You’re being rude,” Nya hisses, smacking at him.

It’s a bit hypocritical, considering she hasn’t looked away herself. But none of them have. They’re all paralyzed by awe, staring at the mass of wires and switches in the place where Zane’s organs should be.

Out of all the outcomes Kai envisioned for today, finding out one of your teammates is a robot was not on the list.

“This doesn’t change the way we see you,” Cole says.

Kai shakes his head fervently. “No matter what you’re made of, you’re still our brother.”

Zane swings the panel closed with a quiet sigh. “Would you give me a moment by myself?” he asks, staring studiously at the floor. “I… need some time for reflection on this.”

They give him some space but linger outside the bunker, because clustermate or not, this isn’t something you leave someone alone with. Then giant tree monsters attack, Zane reappears to save the day, and the sky splits open in a blast of cold light.

Afterwards, once they’ve all calmed down from that *absolutely insane* show of power, Zane beckons them closer with a small, pleased smile. It’s incredible how relaxed he is, not only in comparison to several minutes earlier, but also the entire time Kai’s known him. Something happened in that bunker, he thinks, and Zane confirms it as he fumbles with his gi.

“I remember now,” he exclaims. “I had a father who made me and cared for me. I know who I am.”

"I know I'm not able to leave my own mark," he says, almost shyly. "But I want you all to know that I consider you my asterism."

"Of course you're part of our asterism," Cole bursts. "How could you not think that? After all we've been through together?"

Nya draws him into a hug. "You're one of us," she says simply. She pulls back to look at him and her smile turns sly. "Actually, I might have a way to fix that."

Later that night, Nya dumps out a bag of supplies in their shared room. "I've got needles and ink," she declares, setting them upright together. The last item is a small paring knife that Jay picks up immediately. "And *this.*"

"Where did you get that?" hisses Cole.

"The kitchen, obviously," says Nya with a roll of her eyes.

"This seems slightly dangerous," hazards Zane, but his eyes are shining.

"No, we're doing this," Kai decides.

Jay brandishes the stolen kitchen knife with a wide grin.

They can't leave their stars on his skin. But they can leave them someplace else.

And they do. The night is filled with whispered jokes and laughter, and when morning comes Zane has four new stars etched over top of his heart and they have the matching ones on their chests. His smile shines brighter than the rising sun.

They go about their business after that. There's more snakes, and dance competitions, and people turning into snakes because *someone* didn't trust their clustermates enough to tell them, Jay. When Nya shows them her sketches for a giant mech, they react enthusiastically because they're equals on all fields, including the battle's. When Cole makes up with his father, they all feel his joy through their own marks.

But for as perfect as they all mesh together, there's something still missing. Someone.

The answer comes, from all places, in the form of one Lloyd Montgomery Garmadon.

Lloyd at first glance could easily be mistaken for a miniature black hole. His hoodie is eternally flipped up, his pants hang over his black sneakers, and dark gloves cover even the exposed skin of his hands. His mood constantly flip-flops, one moment snarky and rude, the next quiet and withdrawn. He orbits their group, desperate for attention but withdrawing at the first sign of getting it.

Kai's chest aches when he looks at the kid.

It's not until the Fire Temple that he figures out why.

"It's not worth it!" Nya screams. "Kai, you idiot, we need to leave! Now!"

"No! I can do this!"

The volcano is falling to pieces around them. The snakes have destabilized it in their bid to escape, and now the ground trembles with each chunk of stalactite plunging into the magma. Kai races up the stairs. Pebbles rain down on his head. A wave of molten rock breaks against the wall.

"This whole place is about to explode!"

"Then I better be quick!"

He can see the Fangblade now, clutched in Pythor's scaly grip. It's all he sees as he throws his sword like a knife, by some miracle knocking the Fangblade loose and impaling it into the wall. He's so intent that he doesn't notice the screams from the other side of the chamber, or Pythor escaping above him.

What he does notice is the sudden burning of his mark. Kai gasps out loud, hand clutching the material of his gi. What's happening? He spins around wildly, concentration broken, searching for his clustermates in vain. The Fire Temple is void of stars.

"Kai! Help me!"

Kai's eyes lock on the small figure across the magma. No, not void. There's one more star here, pleading with him with flushed cheeks and wide eyes.

Something for Kai *clicks*.

He abandons the Fangblade. Lloyd squeaks as he spinjitzues across the magma, but Kai seizes the boy up in his arms and pulls him close. Fire burns within him, hot and forceful with the need to protect. "Hold on," he shouts over the roar of the volcano. "I'm getting us out of here."

Lloyd's bare hands, gloves burnt away, wrap around his neck.

The warmth in Kai's chest *explodes*. Fire licks through his veins, burning him from the inside-out. He holds onto Lloyd even as his eyes squeeze closed, even as the ground disappears from under his feet. It feels like a bonfire has been lit in him, one that doesn't plan to burn out any time soon.

They land on the Bounty, hands clutching tightly and tears streaming down their faces. Kai sets Lloyd down gently to pull his gi to the side.

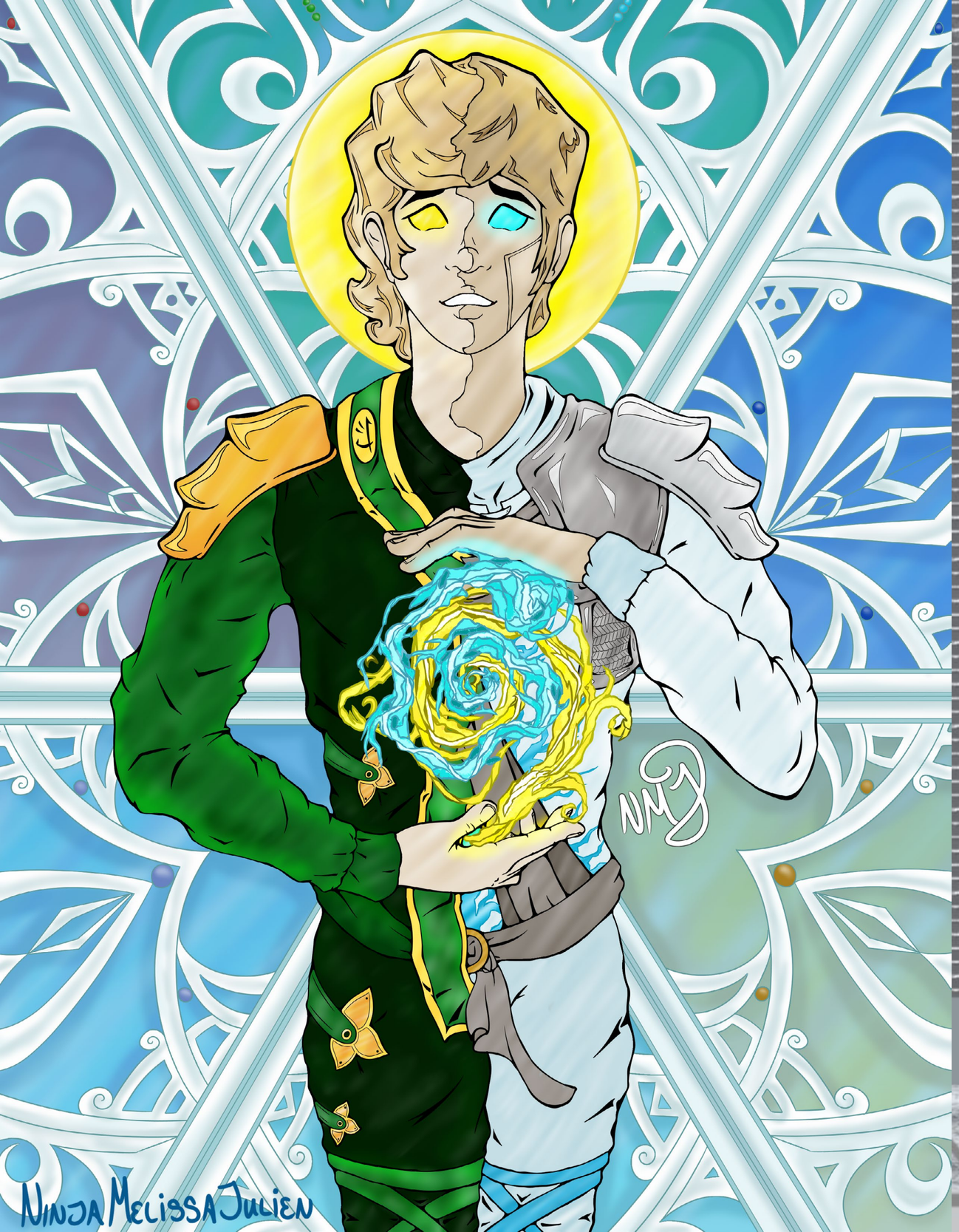
A sixth star has appeared on his chest. The lines connecting them all are dark and solid, arching up in a zigzag pattern from the one at the bottom- *Lloyd's*. Murmurs, then shouting, break out as their clustermates realize what's happening and start vying to be the first to touch their newest and final member.

Kai laughs and tugs Lloyd into a hug, everyone else falling into place with their gravitational pull.

Their final star is here.

NINJAGO

GieRoSajie


NinjaMelissaJulien

"The universe works in mysterious ways"

Evelina Online

Logically, Jay knew he'd never have to set foot on The Dark Island again. At least not for a long time.

But that didn't stop his mind from wandering back to it.

"Why try?"

The worst part was that he wasn't being haunted by the chilling aura of the island, the feeling of being watched, the blinding purple color of dark matter, the echo of The Overlord's laughter… no.

What haunted Jay was the only beacon of hope in all of this–the Temple of Light.

"Try what?" Cole said, sitting down next to him on the street. They had been working in the outskirts of Ninjago City all day, helping to restore it. It had almost been a week since the final battle, and though the city was looking much better, there was still a lot of work to be done.

"Anything." Everything.

"Woah, woah woah," Cole said, placing a comforting hand on Jay's shoulder, but at that moment, it only felt like extra weight. "What's gotten into you all of a sudden?"

"You saw those paintings in the Temple of Light," Jay said. He could still see them, if he closed his eyes; snapshots of their lives since they first became ninja, waiting to be discovered like a shadow in the dark.

"I remember, yeah," Cole said. His tone changed the moment they were brought up–turned more skeptical–but Jay couldn't focus enough to say for sure.

"They were… flawless, weren't they?" asked Jay, pulling his legs close to his chest. "Down to every detail. As if everything was meant to happen." Cole didn't respond. "As if… as if it wasn't our choice in the end."

"Like destiny?"

Jay nodded. "Exactly like destiny, so–" he cut himself off. "So why try to do anything? If it's not up to us, there's no point in… Why try, Cole? What are we even doing here?"

Cole stayed silent again, so Jay went back to chewing on the inside of his cheek. He hated this; this empty feeling of helplessness, like he was trapped in a box with no lid, swimming in an ocean with no surface, dancing on a stage like a puppet with strings.

Someone out there had already chosen his life for him, and Jay couldn't–

"Forget about destiny."

Jay raised an eyebrow. "Isn't it a bit too late for that?"

"Says who? Some writings on a wall? Please." Cole sat next to Jay on the floor. "When have we ever played by the rules?"

"It's not just some rules, Cole!" Jay said. "This isn't Wu's training book or… or Zane's cooking recipes, it's destiny."

"I told you to forget about destiny."

"How?!" Jay threw his hands in the air in an angry gesture. "How can I forget about it when it's what brought all of us here in the first place? Finding the golden weapons, Lloyd becoming the green ninja, defeating The Overlord… all of that's been already decided."

"Then why try?"

"Exactly!" Jay said, pleased that Cole finally got his point. If his plan had been to reach the same conclusion as Jay had, why bother arguing?

… except Cole wasn't really agreeing with him, was he?

"Wait, what?"

"You said it yourself," Cole said, "if everything is pre-decided, why try?"

Jay turned to look at him. "Yeeees, that's what I've been saying," he spoke slowly and cautiously.

"Which means," Cole continued, "that you didn't make an effort to get here."

Jay simply stared at him for a second.

"What?"

"If all of this," Cole gestured vaguely at the city ruins, "was supposed to happen, then all we had to do was sit back and enjoy the ride."

Jay considered it for a second. “But that’s not what I–”

“No, no, it’s okay!” Cole interrupted, a cheerful tone in his voice–a tone that Jay didn’t like one bit–and an even brighter smile on his face. “There’s no need to be ashamed. Your life is already planned for you, right? If that’s the case, I respect your choice at doing nothing.”

“Is this sarcasm?” Jay asked. “It feels like sarcasm.”

“Sarcasm?” Cole raised an eyebrow. “Why would I be sarcastic? I mean, it’s so awesome how you managed to defend all these people without lifting a single finger.”

“Oh, I see where this is going,” Jay mumbled.

“Or clean up Ninjago City. You know, for someone who doesn’t try at all, you’re quite good at moving rocks out of the way.”

Jay sighed deeply. “Sure.”

“And let’s not forget about that effortlessly delicious hot chocolate you made last night. It takes no skill whatsoever to make a better drink than Zane, that makes so much sense.”

“Ha, ha.” Jay crossed his arms, trying not to pay attention to Cole’s comment about his hot chocolate–was it really better than Zane’s?

“What’s so funny?” Cole asked, snapping Jay back into reality. “Did I get something wrong? Maybe you did make an–”

“Of course I made an effort!” Jay finally snapped. “I made an effort with The Overlord, I made an effort cleaning up the city, I even made an effort making that stupid hot chocolate!”

He breathed angrily for a second, his eyes pinned on Cole’s.

“Well, there you have it. You made an effort.”

The ninja of earth had a smug look on his face, as if he’d just made the biggest discovery in the century, but somehow didn’t care about it at the same time. Jay couldn’t decide whether he wanted to explode on the spot or punch Cole in the face.

He decided against it, and huffed instead. “That’s it? That’s your great conclusion?”

Cole nodded. “Yep.”

Jay took a deep breath, carefully considering his next words. “The problem isn’t the effort, Cole,” he said. “The problem is that the outcome is the same despite it.”

“How do you know?”

“Because… because I do!”

Cole hit him.

It wasn’t anything serious; just a playful punch on the side of his arm. And yet, it was so out of the blue that it startled Jay more than he’d like to admit. Jay raised an eyebrow, shooting Cole a confused look.

And then Cole hit him again.

“Stop it,” Jay said, but then Cole used both of his hands to get to him, and before Jay had the chance to grasp what was happening, Cole had tackled him to the ground, poking his sides.

“*Cole!*” Jay let out a shriek, annoyed at himself for not being able to hold back his laughter. He simply couldn’t help it though; he was extremely ticklish, and unfortunately for him, Cole knew that very well.

Through giggles and chuckles and more complaints, the ninja of lightning attempted to fight his way away from Cole. It felt like centuries, but Jay gathered all the strength he could muster and finally kicked Cole off him.

“Heavens, Jay!” Cole said, coughing as he stood on his feet.

“No, don’t you ‘*heavens*’ me!” Jay said, sitting up and leaning his back against the wall. “What in the name of Spinjitzu was that all about?!”

Cole shrugged, hesitantly sitting next to Jay again. “Destiny?”

Jay rolled his eyes, looking away from him. “Idiot.”

He knew his eyes were open, but he couldn’t focus on anything. He could feel his skin as he played with his fingers, but they didn’t feel like his own hands. He knew Cole was there, they’d been wrestling just mere seconds ago, but… but.

They sat in silence for a while. Jay didn’t normally mind it–the silence–not when he was with Cole, but this time he could physically feel there was something hanging in the air between them. He also had a splitting headache. And he was a tad angry at Cole. And tired. And hungry.

“I wouldn’t have stopped, you know,” Cole said, breaking the silence and lifting some of the air.

“Congratulations, you’ve proven to be even more annoying than me,” Jay said, a hint of bitterness in his voice. Cole chuckled then, and Jay couldn’t help but glance at him with the corner of his eye. “What?”

“Nothing, nothing,” Cole said, shaking his head. “It’s just… it’s right there.”

“What is?”

“The point, Jay,” Cole said, his smile visible in his voice. “I wouldn’t have stopped.”

Jay blinked.

“But I did.”

“No. You didn’t,” Jay said. “I stopped you.”

Cole nodded.

Jay groaned. “So, what is this?” he asked. “You’re trying to prove that, what, that I have control over my life just because I prevented you from tickling me to death?”

Another nod. Jay considered it for a second.

“… huh.”

Truth was, every single thing Cole had said so far made perfect sense; but that was exactly why Jay was having so much trouble believing it. Why he hated it–no, why he was scared of it.

He felt Cole’s hand on his, but didn’t dare to look at Cole himself. Instead, his gaze was pinned on their hands on Jay’s lap.

“Destiny isn’t read,” Cole said. “It’s made.”

“Then what’s with all the scrolls?” The question was out of Jay’s mouth before he even realised it. “If it’s all fake, then why–”

“I don’t think it’s fake,” Cole interrupted. “Anyone can choose to follow what’s written on paper, but that doesn’t mean you have to, right? Plus, you and I both know that your imagination runs deeper than some old dried ink.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“Do you want it to be?”

A smile tugged at Jay’s lips.

He wanted to be angry at Cole for bombarding him with even more questions about the meaning of life, but his brain was too tired–and even though he’d never admit it out loud, Cole was starting to make sense.

Maybe they were the ones calling the shots. Just maybe.

Jay turned his hand around so their fingers were intertwined and squeezed his friend’s hand tightly. “Ask me again later.”

Cole raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Yeah,” Jay said with a smile, pulling Cole up. “Now come on. I’m craving hot chocolate.”

@CluelessPXL

0 CREDITS

SPACE INVADERS

HIGH SCORES

1ST JAY 033445

2ND C 053680

3RD Z 37425

4TH K 225

5TH L 975

6TH N 32325

7TH P 77325

8TH C 371710

9TH GARM 54865

10TH WU 45255

0 CREDITS

SPACE INVADERS

HIGH SCORES

1ST OVERLO 9999999

2ND O 9999999

3RD O 99999

4TH O 99

5TH O 99

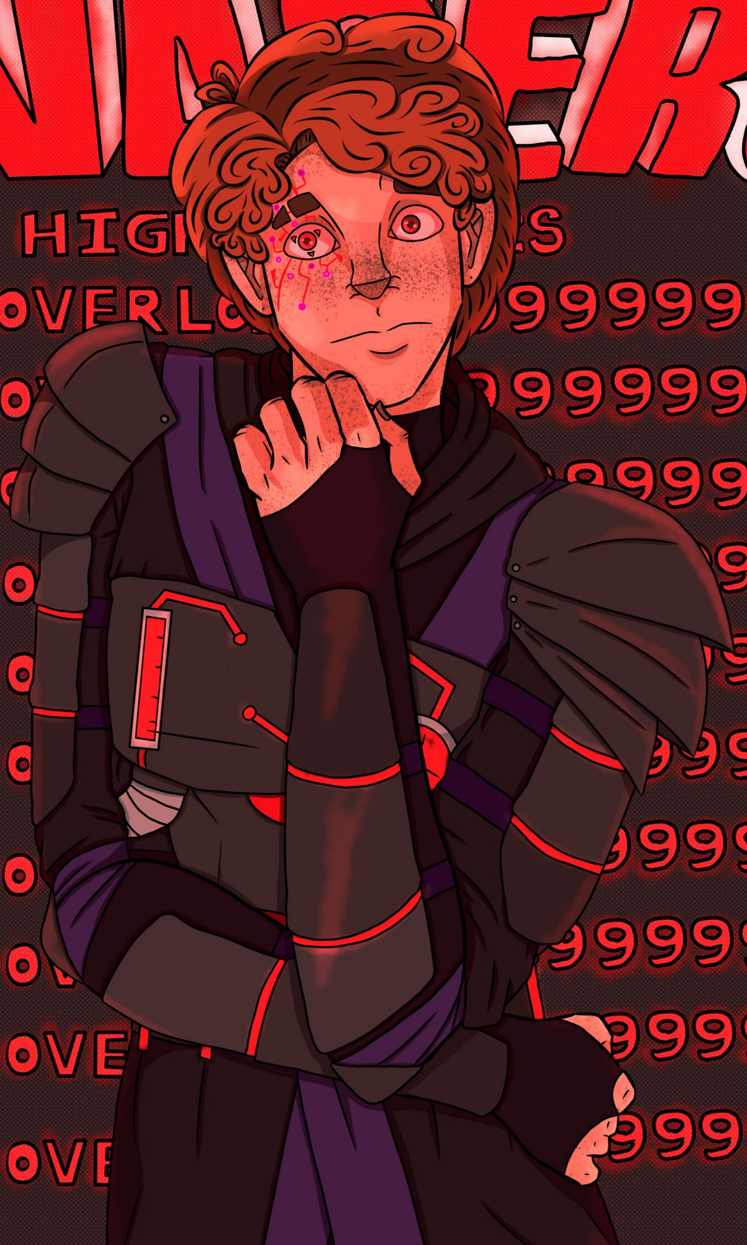
6TH O 999

7TH O 99999

8TH O 999999

9TH OVE 99999

10TH OVE 99999



NAOSCHAOZ
2020

“*Memory Switch*”

glitched-fox

There was something strange about Zane.

It wasn’t just his sudden appearance, or his unexpected fighting skills, or the way Sensei so clearly favored him, despite claiming not to have a favorite of his students.

Zane was just… *weird*, as Cole so eloquently put it.

There were lots of things about Zane that interested Jay and Cole so much. It was the way he was always cold to the touch, no matter how many layers he was wearing and how hot it was outside. How it was almost impossible to find his pulse on any area other than his chest. How when he got cut during training or while cooking, he never seemed to bleed, healing quickly.

There was one thing that Jay found strangest of all, though, given Zane’s otherwise collected disposition.

“...Do you like blue?” Zane had asked Jay once, shortly after he’d joined the team.

Jay raised an eyebrow, glancing at his teammate. “‘Course I do! That was, like, one of the first things I told you guys. It’s my favorite color.”

Zane hummed and tilted his head slightly, staring off into the sky above them. There wasn’t a cloud in sight today, but luckily the breeze balanced out the sun’s heat. “It’s a nice color.”

“I like darker blues, honestly,” Jay elaborated, watching Zane for a reaction. “Like, a nice neon electric blue is good, but pale blues just don’t hit the same for me. What about you?”

“There’s a lot of color out here, isn’t there?” said Zane, looking around. “Green, for example. I didn’t get to see green very often in the forest. I like white, though. It’s… familiar.”

“White isn’t a color, silly,” Jay teased. “Also, that’s kinda sad.”

“Is it?” Zane hummed again. “Blue is nice. I think I like the pale blues that you don’t, though.”

“Aw, that’s alright! We can share blue.” Jay bumped shoulders with his friend, grinning. “It’s a good color.”

Zane was fond of that spot under the tree where they had that conversation. Jay thought it was a fine tree, all things considered. Now, he’d much rather sit in the tree than against it, but Zane was Zane. And Zane liked to sit under his tree and watch the sun crawl across the sky and animals scurry across the path. He appreciated the little details of the world that Jay never slowed down for–Cole was more of a big picture guy; not even he stopped to watch caterpillars creep across fallen leaves like Zane did.

Still. The tree was fine, and sitting under it was relaxing, so as strange as Zane was, that wasn’t part of it.

Jay joined him under the tree again, one cool afternoon.

“...Do you like blue?” asked Zane, staring off into the expanse of sky above them.

Jay furrowed his brow. “Uh, yeah, duh. Didn’t we just have this conversation?”

Zane canted his head. “Did we?”

“Yeah, like, last week. I said I liked dark neon stuff and you said you liked white and I told you white isn’t a color so you decided you like blue. Like, sky blue.”

“Oh.” Zane was silent for a minute. “There’s a lot of color out here, isn’t there?”

To say that Jay was unnerved would be an understatement. He approached Cole about it later, who responded with a simple shrug.

“That’s Zane for you, I guess,” said Cole, dismissively. “He forgets things sometimes. Not usually important things, just… you gotta be patient with him. That’s what Sensei said, anyway.”

Patience was not one of Jay’s virtues. But he’d try.

Having been made aware of Zane’s faulty memory, the examples were suddenly easier to spot. Cole held onto Zane’s shurikens for him outside of training. There was a log on the fridge of what meals had already been served for dinner that week. Zane wasn’t told about plans until just before they happened… which often resulted in him not being prepared for trips. It wasn’t his fault, though. Jay felt bad for the guy, really.

The next time Jay found Zane under the tree, Jay carried a small bag with him. He sat down beside Zane with a smile. “Hey. I got you something.”

Zane tilted his head in curiosity. “Why? We’re not near any gift-giving holidays, I believe.”

“I dunno. Felt like it,” Jay said with a shrug. “When’s your birthday, anyway?”

“I… do not know.” Zane rubbed at his chest with a frown. “I don’t know much about myself aside from my name. I woke up with no memories one day, and from there it wasn’t all that long before Master Wu found me.” Catching Jay’s crestfallen look, he quickly added, “It’s alright, really. I’ll figure it out eventually.”

Jay wasn’t entirely convinced, but he’d let it slide. For now. He nodded, then held up the bag. “So. Uh. Present.” He offered it to Zane, who took it and set it gently in his lap. “There’s a few things in there. I know it’s not much, but…”

Slowly, Zane reached into the bag and pulled out the first object: a journal. The cover was a faded baby blue, with a white snowflake pattern along the edges. He held it cautiously, as if it would fall apart in his hands. After admiring it for a moment, he set it down beside him, inspecting the rest of the bag's contents. There was a pack of colored pens, a stack of origami paper, and a small box containing a set of silver fairy lights.

"You went and got this all for me?" Zane asked, in awe of the objects now strewn about him. Jay nodded eagerly.

"Well, Cole got the lights and Master Wu told me you wanted to try origami, so it was kinda a team effort, but yeah!" Jay tapped the box. "You take these and string them up around your room. They look really pretty! Cole and I can help you hook them up if you need." Zane nodded. Jay motioned to the journal. "*That's* what I originally wanted to get for you. I, uh, know you have some issues with memory, so I figured it might be useful to have somewhere to write down anything you wanna remember? My dad does something similar. I went ahead and put some stuff about Cole and I, but the rest of it's blank for you to fill in!"

Zane picked up the journal again, eyes shining with a new sense of wonder. He opened it delicately, smoothing out the paper of the first page as he stared at Jay's scratchy handwriting. Jay hadn't written much at all, just their birthdays and a few of their favorite things, written in blue for his own and orange for Cole. Zane ran a hand over the writing, careful not to smudge the ink. "I don't know what to say. Thank you, Jay."

"No problem! This is just what friends do."

Zane made good use of that journal. While Jay never got a chance to look through it, he saw Zane writing in it at every given opportunity, if only to keep his hands busy when he had nothing else to do. The monastery started to fill with origami pieces of various shapes and sizes, tucked away in every nook and cranny. Cole barked a laugh one day on a day trip, and for a moment Jay wondered why–then he opened his packed lunch and discovered a note from Zane. Jay's name, written in beautiful calligraphy with two shades of blue, accompanied by smaller text in a language Jay couldn't read.

For a while, it was fine.

Then the monastery burned.

The first night on the ship that Zane found was… strange. Fitting for a place Zane had picked out, in Jay's opinion. Despite the soft smile on Zane's face throughout the evening, Jay found him alone in what was soon to be their shared room, sitting against the wall. He fiddled with the sleeve of his gi, now torn and singed from the day's events, his pale eyes staring at nothing.

"Zane?"

The white ninja looked up at the sound of his name. He tilted his head in acknowledgement. "Jay. Is something wrong?"

"I was about to ask you that." Jay sat down beside him, folding his arms over a folded knee. "What's up? You missing the monastery already?"

The white ninja nodded after a moment, eyes wide. "Is that weird?"

"'Course not. It was our *home*. We lived there for ages. It's alright to be upset."

"Okay." Zane turned his attention to his hands, slowly curling his fingers into a fist before splaying them again. "It's… my journal was in my room. It's gone now." He traces the groves of the floor, focusing on anything other than his own words. "I don't know what to do."

Jay… hadn't thought about that, honestly. What he was going through, mourning the place he'd made his best memories… Zane didn't have that luxury. The journal had improved his recall, if only a little bit, but still. "It's alright, buddy. Tell you what–once we get a moment to breathe, I'll get you a new journal, okay? I know it's not the same, and you lost a lot of work, but… it's the least I can do."

Zane nodded, and didn't say anything else for the rest of the night.

Ironically, they both forgot about it.

Well, Zane did. Jay remembered, every so often, when he saw Zane fidgeting. He kept making the mental note to find time to take a trip into town, but… it never happened. The pattern of Zane forgetting and therefore not being told things was re-established. Jay didn't think anything of Zane's memory issues…

...not until after the Birchwood Forest incident, that is.

"I have a memory switch," Zane said, shifting his weight from foot to foot nervously. He watched Jay for his reaction, who simply indicated for him to keep talking. Jay sat at his workbench, examining the blueprints Zane had handed him a moment earlier. "It was turned off. When I switched it on, I remembered everything about my life. My father, my upbringing, my true nature… but there's something I don't understand."

"That's why you came to me, right?" Jay traced over the designs with a finger, trying to make sense of the illegible notes in the margins.

"Right. I don't know how adept you are with robotics, but–"

"Eh. I've dabbled. What's up?"

"I remember my father saying something about that switch wiping my memory. If that's true, then why was I able to access memories that should've been gone forever? I don't think it would leave any residual code, would it?" He rubbed the back of his head, sheepish. "Admittedly, I'm still recovering the knowledge of my own systems…"

Jay furrowed his brow. From what of the notes he was able to read… "It doesn't look like it's a total wipe. It seems more, like… okay, here." He grabbed a piece of scrap paper and a pencil, drawing out a line with a square on each end. "This square is you, and this one is the system that stores your memory, alright?" He labeled them. Zane nodded.

"I'm with you so far."

"A wipe would be like if I erased this memory square. You might still be able to see traces of it if you squint at it, but if you don't know it's there, you wouldn't. I don't think that's what your switch does. I think your switch, like…" He drew another line down the middle of the first one,

creating a separation between the two squares. “Like this. It creates a block when it’s off between you and your memory storage. So you can’t access any of your memories.”

Zane stared at the paper. “Oh.”

“Oh?”

“Jay, that’s why I had such awful memory. If my memory storage was blocked off, then even if I was able to form new memories, I wouldn’t be able to access them.” His voice rose towards the end of his explanation, eyes alight with excitement. “That’s why everything feels so clear now. I can remember things.”

Jay blinked, slowly processing the realization. “Oh.”

Zane laughed. He was happier than Jay thought he’d ever seen him.

Since the ninja now lived on the Bounty, the tree that Zane used to sit under was no longer an option. Instead, he sat against the mast of the ship while no one else was above deck, watching the clouds pass by and polishing his shurikens. Jay joined him one day, carrying a small bag with him. He sat down beside Zane with a smile. “I got you something.”

“This feels familiar,” said Zane, amused. “We’re still not near any gift-giving holidays.”

“Yeah, but there was a date on your blueprints. It’s almost a date I’m going to call your birthday, but I wanted to do this before I forgot again.” He handed over the bag. “It’s less stuff this time, sorry, but I hope you like it?”

Zane hummed. He reached into the bag and pulled out… a journal. The covers were adorned in light blue felt, the edges glued down. Tiny paper snowflakes were glued to the edges and the spine. The other item in the bag was a pack of colored pens. “Did you make this?”

“Uh. Sorta. The other one was just a random one I found in the department store. I found this journal in a box of stuff I got from my parents and realized I had never written in it, so I decided to personalize it for you.” Jay leaned over Zane’s shoulder as he opened the journal. The first few pages were filled with short profiles on each of the ninja, with space for Zane to add to it. “I, uh, know you don’t exactly need this anymore, but for old time’s sake I thought I–”

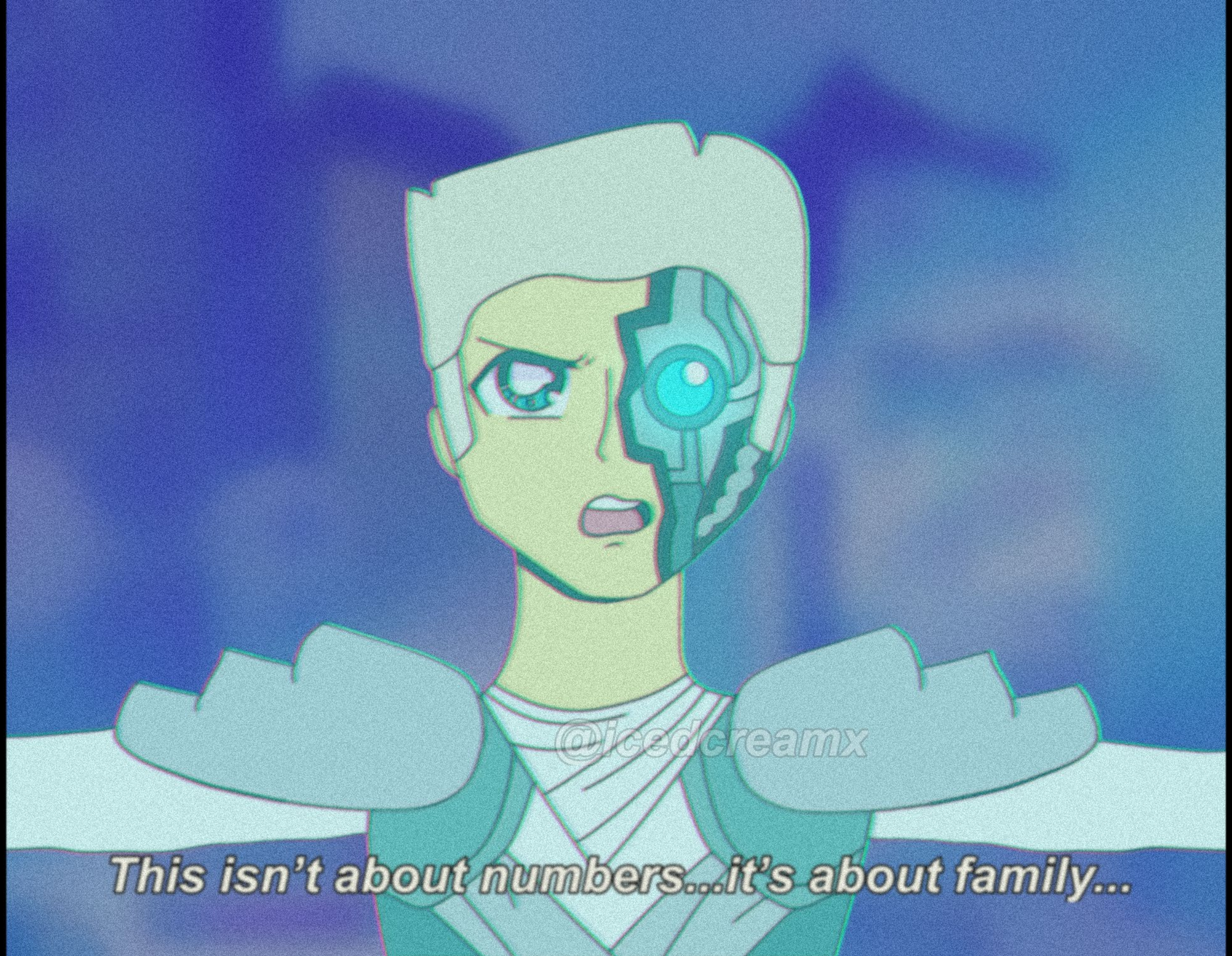
“Jay. It’s perfect.” Zane closed the journal carefully and set it off to the side before turning just enough to wrap his arms around his friend in a hug. “Really. I love it. Thank you.”

The hug lasted longer than was strictly necessary. They sat together in silence after that, Zane watching the clouds while Jay tinkered with his watch. It was nice to see Zane happy, Jay decided.

Finally, Zane looked back toward Jay. He was still smiling and his eyes sparkled with humor. “Hey, Jay?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you like blue?”


@icedcreamx
This isn't about numbers...it's about family...

TAM
2020

"Storge"

TheBrassyLassy

Lloyd used to wonder. He knew his life- and the life of his teammates-was less than desirable. He knew very well that most people, if given the chance, would never even try to live it, and if they did, they'd bail out the first chance they saw.

And yet 5 people didn't. They'd gone through some rough patches, even broken up once, but at the end of the day, they always came back together. *Why,* Lloyd wondered. *Why do they choose this?*

Nya baffled him. She was brave and intelligent, and certainly independent enough to do just fine on her own. She didn't need the team the way the team needed her- or so Lloyd thought. But then he remembered the way she'd cried over Zane's death, over the remaining members going their separate ways. He remembered how hard she tried to keep everyone safe and together, the near-fervently way she protected him.

Kai, too, confused him. He had a real job before becoming a ninja- although Nya told him that her brother hadn't been very good at it. But Kai always spoke fondly of blacksmithing, saying how it made him feel closer to his father. Once the Fire Ninja had been reunited with said father, he even began practicing again(good thing, too, seeing as how the fate of Ninjago depended on it not too long ago). He could easily make it on his own- but there were all those nights where his internal temperature got out of wack and Zane iced to the room for him. There were all the times that he said that the team was what kept him sane, that he couldn't live without them. But still, Lloyd wondered.

Cole was quite mysterious himself. He never spoke of what he would do, if it weren't for his 'job' as a vigilante ninja, but Lloyd always figured he'd start a community garden or a flower shop. It made sense that the Earth Ninja would be good with plants, but it still came as a shock to many people- although it had been a pleasant one for Lloyd, as he, too, harbored a love of living things. So whether or not Cole had the same fruitless plans and ambitions as the others, Lloyd was certain he could live without the team if he wanted to. But he enjoyed cooking for *them*, he said(though he was bad at it), he enjoyed drawing *them*, and he enjoyed living his life with *them*.

Zane made the most sense to Lloyd, but it was still almost none. The nindroid had no one else, no backup plans. But he didn't need them, really- he possessed an incredible intellect and could gain any skill in a matter of minutes. Anything Zane wanted to do, he could. And yet he chose to stick with his ragtag team, always smiling and deflecting the question when asked why. But if you looked at the way he specifically cooked what each of them liked, the way he nursed their wounds with such care though he himself could feel no pain, the way he reminded them all of appointments and medications, then maybe, Lloyd mused, you might be able to see why.

But Jay was an enigma, and would never be anything but. He was the only one of them to ever have a shot at *normal-* and he blew it, to instead spend his life fighting crime with them. He had two loving parents(adoptive they may be), grew up in one fixed location, even went to normal school. He, if he wanted, could get a full-ride scholarship to that one engineering university he used to talk about, get a degree and live a long, fulfilling, normal life. But he said that wasn't the path he wanted. He'd rather risk life and limb every day, fighting side by side with the team, cracking jokes and charging phones for them.

Lloyd, himself, never once contemplated leaving them. He had no desire to, especially not after they repeatedly chose not to, and it's not like he even could. Green Ninja prophecy and family obligations aside, being a ninja was the only skill he really had. If he had any experience, prior knowledge, or even just knew basic math, then it might be a different story, but- this was his life, he couldn't change that, and Lloyd had long since accepted it. And some selfish part of him was glad that the others stuck with him, too, because he certainly couldn't handle living without them.

But at the same time, he almost wished they would just get normal jobs, for their own sake. Nya would get to be an inventor as a real job, not just as a hobby, frequently pushed aside. Zane could accel in anything he wanted and change the world. And they would be *safe-* and really, security and happiness was all Lloyd wished for them.

And yet all of them stayed together. It took Lloyd quite a while to figure out *why* they chose to forsake their dreams, but he did eventually get it. And it wasn't some midnight heart-to-heart conversation(those were kept to a minimum), but a bag of microwave popcorn.

They had been watching a movie together- a remarkably *awful* movie- when Jay, likely bored, had tossed a piece of popcorn, skillfully, right onto Kai's hair from across the living room. The Fire Ninja had faked indignance, retaliating by lobbing a whole handful at Jay. Except Kai never really had the best aim, so the pieces rained down on half of the team instead. In mock outrage, his sister began throwing popcorn at both of them, and soon Zane, Cole, and Lloyd joined in, too. It was such a simple moment- pelting two of his older brothers with wasted food- that made Lloyd realize that *that was it*.

They were his older brothers. Nya was his older sister. It had always been that way, but not until that second did Lloyd understand that it was this familial bond that kept them together. Maybe they *could* all get their own jobs and lead their own lives, but none of them would really be *living*, then. They needed each other. They loved each other.

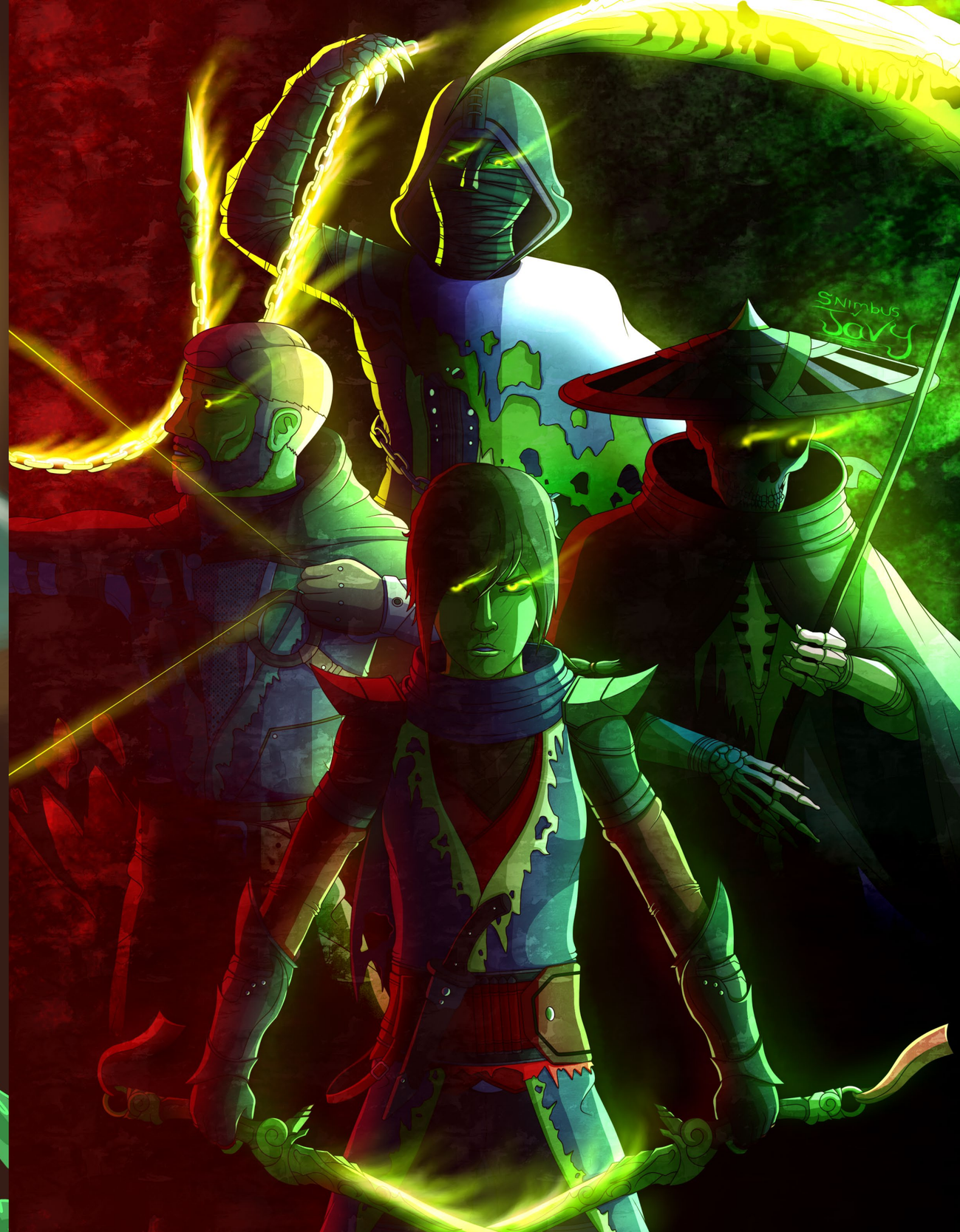
And from that moment on, Lloyd didn't wonder anymore.

sensei-wus-beard

He Was

My Greatest

Regret



NINJAGO RECOLLECTION

"What's Beyond the Horizon?"

Sibilla

The music echoed across the deck of the ship, along with the singing. Flintlocke imagined Doubloon would be as well, based on how he was dancing. As if the Scrap and Tap party hadn't been enough. After tricking the master of lightning into thinking he had a chance to escape, the crew's spirits got riled up again. It seemed having a late night party was the best solution.

After all, there wasn't much to loot. By now they'd gathered more than enough land for themselves and this new kingdom.

So why wasn't the captain celebrating with them?

He had, briefly, but then once again floated off on his own. The only time Nadakhan did that was when he was planning, but what was there to plan for?

Jay's words kept bouncing around in Flintlocke's head.

"Oi, Flintlocke!"

Dogshank's voice and her foot slamming into the wooden floor made him jump. He looked at her before looking at the rest of his crewmates. They were gathered in their own spot, the gang of members who'd been with Nadakhan the longest. They were all staring at him, Doubloon's frown on his face.

"Sorry," Flintlocke scratched his neck. "Did I miss something?"

"I was uh, w-wondering…" Clancee stammered. "If you uh, wanted anymore um, r-rum?"

Flintlocke looked down at his now empty cup. Just where had it all gone? He didn't recall drinking it, and the buzz hadn't hit him yet.

"Nah." He put it down on the ground. "But thanks for offerin'."

Dogshank squinted at him, but the rest of the group returned to whatever conversation they were having. Flintlocke tried to focus on it. It was easy to lose track between translating Monkey Wretch's screeching and Doubloon's sign language. Clancee hadn't said anything yet—more focused on giving Monkey Wretch more rum—and Dogshank only listened.

Finally, Flintlocke could make out what was being said.

"[More defenses.]" Monkey Wretch argued.

"You just want more weapons." Doubloon signed.

Flintlocke raised an eyebrow and leaned over to Dogshank. "Uh, just what did I miss?"

Once again, Dogshank studied him. "We were talking about plans for when Djinjago is finished."

Monkey Wretch immediately turned and screeched. "[Going to build defense ships. No invaders coming here.]"

Flintlocke had to agree. It sounded like their mechanic friend just wanted to build more weaponry. That'd probably be fine by Nadakhan though, assuming they had the resources.

Doubloon shook his head as his mask turned to his more cheerful face. "I'm thinking we should establish our own land, then slip back to the mainland for some more thieving. There's a lot of new tech out there."

Flintlocke could agree to that too. Having his own space… that was something foreign to him at this point after years of sharing a room on the ship. Could he have his own house? Did he even want to live alone?

"Chaos sounds good to me." Dogshank rested one hand on her knee while she drank down her entire cup of rum. Her mask was off, showing her twisted fangs and the scar that ran over her mouth. Flintlocke tried not to stare.

"We need to cause that much chaos?" He asked. "Stealing land is more than we've ever done. What else could we take."

"[Gold!]" Monkey Wretch jumped.

Doubloon nodded.

"I'm just itching for another fight." Dogshank nudged Flintlocke with her elbow. "Those ninjas have presented an interesting challenge. I have to wonder if there's even tougher opponents out there."

Flintlocke almost didn't want to toy with the idea. The ninjas were enough of a headache as is, even if their captain was having an easy time taking them out and trapping them in the sword. The more he trapped, the more powerful he got. Just how much stronger would he get?

He tore himself out of his own thoughts as he glanced at Clancee who finally sat down, holding his cup in a death grip.

"What about you?" He asked the serpentine. "You got any plans?"

"Ah, well, no, n-not really." His tail curled up over his feet. "Just want to lend a hand, you know. M-maybe help clean things up."

Monkey Wretch chittered at Clancee, something about polishing some cannons. Flintlocke didn't catch it. He wasn't entirely surprised by Clancee's answers, but some days the serpentine made

him curious. He couldn't tell if Clancee really was that eager to please or just too afraid to try anything else.

"What about you?" Dogshank turned the question on him. Her eyes were still suspicious, that yellow almost glowing in the low light. "What's the first mate got planned when this is over?"

He opened his mouth, about to ask if it'd ever be over, but shut it again as he thought. "Don't know." He spoke honestly. "Been so long on this ship, not sure I'd know life without it. May take time to adjust."

"W-well, it's not like the crew is going anywhere." Clancee said. "Right? We're all um, going to stay together. I'm sure we'll f-find more adventures."

"Ever the optimist." Dogshank spoke it like an insult, but honestly it was just a fact.

Flintlocke just looked back at his empty cup. He really wasn't sure what he'd do with his life if he wasn't a pirate. Try and build an actual relationship with Dogshank? Maybe. He couldn't get the damn lightning ninja's words out of his head. If Nadakhan did get even more powerful, did manage to find a way to grant his own wishes, would he even keep any of them around? Flintlocke trusted Nadakhan, but it was mainly out of necessity. He hadn't forgotten that the djinn tricked him into being part of this crew. He'd tricked all of them. If Nadakhan decided they'd run out of use, then…

Flintlocke sighed and stood up. "I'm turnin' in for the night."

Doubloon frowned. "So early?"

"Early? Gods know what hour it is. We were already up late enough with scrap and tap and then this whole trick the captain planned." Which didn't even work. Jay refused to waste his last wish. "I'm turnin' in."

Clancee yawned. "M-me too, actually. It is um, pretty late."

Doubloon didn't look happy, but must have conceded as he got up.

Flintlocke wouldn't stick around to see if everyone followed suit. Initially he headed to his quarters, but his brain was still swimming. There was too much going on in his head. He'd never be able to sleep like this, and lying awake in a room full of pirates was far too uncomfortable for his liking.

So he kept walking down the hall, up the stairs, onto the upper area of the deck. He grabbed onto the rope and climbed his way up to the crow's nest. It wasn't as well built as he'd like. He assumed a look out was a moot point when they could just fly above whatever might be attacking them. Still, it felt safer to sit up here, eyes fixed on the horizon. It looked so much different now, a sea of clouds rather than the usual ocean. If he watched it long enough, it seemed to move in the same waves. The stars above were bright at this hour, and Flintlocke sometimes couldn't stop staring at them. They were the only thing that didn't change after all those centuries.

The rest of the crew seemed so quick to adapt to this future they found themselves in. Maybe Flintlocke was the odd one out.

Something heavy landed in the crow's nest. Flintlocke jumped and turned, only to see Dogshank. She leaned against the mast, eyes looking through him again.

"Turning in, huh?" Her mask was back on, muffling her voice. "Liar."

Flintlocke frowned. "Maybe I want to sleep up here. Or keep a watch out."

"There's nothing to watch for up here."

"You don't know that. Them ninja could come up with a sneak attack to get their friend back."

Dogshank rolled her eyes before she sat down. With one hand, she pulled Flintlocke onto her lap. The motion surprised him, but he didn't protest. He couldn't recall a moment they'd been in close contact since being freed. It used to be such a common thing, at least as long as there was no one else around. Those days of just sailing across the ocean to their next destination, no chores left to manage. Sometimes when they were the only ones in the sleeping quarters she'd let him braid her hair, or run her claws through his. It was more soothing than it sounded.

"What are you really doing up here?" She wrapped her arm around his torso, a sign that he wasn't going to escape anytime soon. Not that he would. He was quite content to lean against her shoulder.

"Can't stop thinkin'. Wanted some air."

"About?"

Flintlocke didn't answer that at first. He wasn't sure if he should. He loved Dogshank, wasn't shy about admitting it, but he wasn't sure he could trust her with this. So much doubt against the captain could be labeled as mutiny in and of itself.

"Everyone keeps saying when Djinjago is finished it'll be over. Even the captain is." Flintlocke sighed. "But I'm not so sure that's true."

"No?"

"He keeps going for more power, even though we have more than we need." He gestured out to the floating islands.

"Isn't the life of a pirate to always go after more? To be the best?"

"Has to end at some point, petunia. Do we really want to do this forever?" He rolled his shoulder. "And I'm not saying I wouldn't, just wish the captain would be more honest about it."

She hummed. "I can understand that. Hard to plan ahead if we don't know what the plan is."

"Exactly."

"But," she continued. "Regardless of what happens, we still have the crew. I imagine we're more than prepared to deal with it."

Flintlocke didn't want to argue with that, even less so with the stare she was giving him. Her eyes were gentle, but firm.

Would they be prepared to deal with it? Especially if their own captain turned on them? They weren't questions he could ask. Not without causing more trouble.

"Perhaps." He looked back out at the stars. "Be weird to think about settling down anyway, yeah?"

Dogshank shrugged. "I don't know. I think I could, as long as I can still explore now and then. A house sounds like fun, don't you think? A room for displaying weapons or… building a place to train."

Flintlocke couldn't keep himself from laughing. "That would be the first thing on your mind. Not thinking about a kitchen at least? I've heard there's all kinds of fancy cooking appliances now."

She snorted. "You know I'm a terrible cook."

"But I'm not." Fintlocke pointed at her. "And I know you love eatin'."

"Oh? Are you suggesting we're going to be living together?"

Heat rushed to his cheeks at the realization. "Ah, my apologies, apple blossom. That was a bit too forward."

He could tell she was smiling by the way her eyes squinted. "Back to the flower nicknames again too, I see."

He crossed his arms. "I know you don't hate them."

"That's true, I don't." She looked out at the horizon. "I don't hate you either."

Flintlocke wanted to ask what that meant. If it meant she would share a house with him, maybe the rest of their lives, but he kept his mouth shut. She was never one for those kinds of conversations. He was better off just letting things fall where they may.

They sat in silence after that. She pulled her arm away from his torso, but Flintlocke didn't move. His cheek rested on her shoulder and he could feel his exhaustion starting to take hold. That only got worse when he felt her claws lightly run over his scalp.

This. He wanted this. If he could just do this for the rest of his life he figured he could be happy. If Jay was wrong, and this place would go on to become their utopia, could he convince Dogshank to spend more quiet moments with him like this?

But what if Jay was right?

Flintlocke smashed the rest of his doubt down, at least for now. He just wanted to fall asleep like this.

Especially if it was his last chance to do so.

ED+EDNA

“You belong to me, my snow white queen, there’s nowhere to run”

ABC

Nya remembers it all.

It never happened, of course. That was the condition of Jay’s last wish: that none of it had ever happened in the first place.

Yet she remembers.

It’s good that she does, honestly. She’ll recognize the threat if it ever presents itself again. Plus, the others don’t remember, so they can’t worry themselves about it.

Jay wanted to tell them. “*No more secrets,*” he said. She’s proud of him, she really is, at least he’s learned from dragging them through hell and back …

But she can’t do it.

She remembers Jay’s eyes, glinting bright and worried in a dim room, as he asks if she’s sure about this; Nya remembers her voice hardening to keep vulnerability from bleeding through as she nods. She’s well aware it’s unwise to keep a secret this heavy, thank you, but they’re both heart-wrenchingly familiar with secrets. What’s one more?

Getting angry at Jay for keeping secrets and then turning around and asking to keep this one … it’s hypocritical. She sees the recognition of the fact in his eyes, but there’s understanding mixed with it; it’s his secret, too. It’s their burden to shoulder behind closed doors, afraid to face their family. After losing Zane and getting him back, after Chen and Garmadon, after *Morro*, peace feels fraught, like walking a tightrope over another storm. How would the others react to knowing they’d broken again? She doesn’t want to deal with the answer to that question.

So Nya does what she does best. She squares her shoulders and marches through each day, reminding herself with each skip of her heart, each flash of her life before her eyes, each time the world blurs that it’s over now. It spits in the face of every lesson life’s beaten into her bones, reverting to stubbornness and pride and the kind of independence that would rather see her amputate an injured limb than get help for it, but it’s a twisted kind of easier to wrestle her pain in silence. The sky pirates made it clear that she needs to stop being afraid to rely on her team, and with a distant sense of guilt it occurs to her that applies to her emotions about this situation, too, but ...

But that fight’s over. And Nya honestly wants nothing more than to take the lesson to heart and put the rest behind her. Let sleeping dogs lie, and all.

Slight problem with that plan: she’s beginning to get the feeling they don’t want to stay asleep. Nya’s good at compartmentalizing, and has been ever since she was an orphan child balancing school and keeping the forge afloat, but the neat dividers are starting to give.

All she can do is watch as the cracks spider out like the Tiger Widow’s web.

Lloyd sits on the edge of the ship’s deck at night, sometimes.

Who knows what he’s thinking. Nya knows her little brother would rather sort through his feelings behind curtains, and they’re all working on helping him open up, but sometimes there’s nothing to do but be there with someone while they watch the world turn.

Tonight, thoughts zipping through her head with manic intensity and no distraction to stop them, she joins him, letting her legs hang over the edge of the Bounty. He acknowledges her with a smile and inches closer, then turns back to face the clouds, eyes searching the scene like there’s a cosmic answer somewhere in the moonlight poking through the blanket of grey. The sky roils in dark, angry sheets, air thick enough to slice with a knife. Nya remembers another storm out at churning sea, splinters from a shipwreck, a missing friend and her bubbling fury in the aftermath, and shudders.

Lloyd doesn’t speak, but he’s gripping a photo of his father with white knuckles and a pinched face. And she understands.

Never once has Lloyd gotten to choose his path. His only crime was wanting Garmadon in his life, and the gift he received in return for it was becoming fated to finish his father off, once, then twice. It’s a painful game, to be destiny’s plaything.

Self-centered as it is, Nya wants to think she gets it. Rarely does she get to choose, either. Being folded into the fate of Ninjago via kidnapping from blacksmith shop had been exciting until she was relegated to damsel in distress and left on the wayside. Then when she’d forged her own path as Samurai X, she had to give it up and be the water ninja instead. Water ninja. Kai’s sister. Jay’s love interest. The girl. *Nadakhan’s prize*.

Never a thought for what Nya wants to be. Just roles and labels to live up to whether she likes it or not, forced upon her like a wedding dress sewn for someone else.

And the one choice she could make ended up …

Her chest tightens until she’s dizzy.

Once the world sharpens back into focus, Nya casts Lloyd a sympathetic glance and quietly traces the feathery outlines of the clouds with her eyes. It’s a good night for commiserating, and she’s not feeling talkative, either.

She wonders what she is now, and her throat tightens.

Nya catches, out of the corner of her eye, the breathless headline on the tabloid lining the rack at the grocery store–“DEVASTATING FACTS ABOUT THE GIRL NINJA!!” –and bites back the urge to scream herself hoarse.

The public eye is an unforgiving one, she knows that, she's long since resigned herself to it. But sometimes it grates, the way everyone seems to presume they can weigh in on Nya.

The people out there don't know *anything* about her. All they care about is that she's the girl, and there's drama behind her they can gobble up like starved mutts.

She doesn't let on about it much, because being imperfect is kind of one of her worst nightmares, but she knows she's made mistakes in the past. She was prideful, even haughty. She strung Jay and Cole along for way too long because the attention got to her head, and the paparazzi will *never* let her forget it. Nya should have been the bigger person and cut it short, instead of letting Cole keep going with it because he was mad Jay didn't trust him, or letting Jay's jealousy fester as long as it did. Bit late for that, though.

It's hardly like her faults stop there. Being hunted by Nadakhan and upset by Jay's refusal to understand her "no" meant *no*, on top of the fact that her independence would only ever be conditional sinking in from becoming the water ninja … it was a perfect storm of stress, and it made her nasty. Jay keeping secrets and endangering them all was the last straw. She blew up, lashed out, furious that she couldn't trust anything to go right.

She still regrets it. The bruises on his skin after his rescue are still imprinted on her eyelids when she wakes up, sometimes.

So she's not perfect, by a long shot. But …

(Greedy eyes following her every movement, wanting her as she runs. Blinking to find another family member gone. Fighting for her life as the pirates capture her. Being wrestled into someone else's gown. Pushing desperately against Dilara's spirit snatching away her autonomy. Venom seeping into her gown, frigid then BURNING, the ability to think slipping–)

Nya loosens the death grip she has on her basket. Takes a deep breath in, then out.

They don't know *anything* about her. Tabloids and TV hosts and publicists can gossip all they want about Nya's mistakes; they'll never convince her she deserved to die for them.

Kai is many things, and stupid is definitely one of them, sometimes. But he isn't stupid when it comes to how Nya's doing, and she knows this. If anything, she's the idiot for thinking she could keep herself under wraps from him for long. Kai must have noticed the tough veneer she's painted over herself, and how secretive she's being with them, because Kai knows she doesn't like to be open about feeling unwell, and Nya knows that it worries him.

Ironically enough, that worry is why she knows she can't ever tell Kai what happened. Ever since she revealed herself as Samurai X, he'd learned not to hover, and Nya's endlessly grateful that he's understanding enough to trust in her strength. Nowadays, Kai's concern manifests in significant glances, questioning hands on her shoulder, hugs a little tighter and lingering longer than normal, discreetly asking if there's anything she wants to tell him.

He's taken to all that behavior in hyperdrive, of course, because there is no way Nya's snippiness and constant tension and nights in the kitchen making tea after nightmares slipped his notice.

But that's fine. Nya would rather deal with the quiet apprehension radiating off him now than the full-blown panic she's bound to have on her hands if Kai ever found out that she'd lost her life and he'd been helpless to do anything but watch.

She has an idea what it'll look like, too. He'd taken Lloyd's possession hard enough–Nya had caught him pummeling punching bags in the training room until his knuckles bled, noticed the heaviness in his eyes when he looked at their little brother, or at Cole, and no matter how much she insisted that he hadn't failed, Kai refused to let himself believe it. Uttering a word about the Sky Pirates to her older brother, Kai who had practically raised them both, Kai who had only ever become a ninja to save her, Kai who had blamed himself so ruthlessly for Zane and Lloyd and Cole?

It would break him.

She just can't do that to him. She'll stitch her lips shut if that's what it takes to make sure he never finds out.

So when Kai fixes them both mugs of chamomile tea at 2 in the morning, and casually remarks on the strange amount of repairs she's been doing on the perfectly intact Bounty, Nya just smiles tiredly at him and fires off some sarcastic retort that's sure to rile him up.

She loves her older brother, which is why she made the decision to take this secret to her grave.

Nya notices while brushing her hair, one day, that she's neglected to pay attention to it; the sleek black strands are almost to her shoulder, rather than brushing against her chin like she's used to. Once she's teased out every last snarl, she goes to cut her hair, but hesitates right before the scissors snip.

When she looks in the mirror, sometimes it's Dilara's face flashing before her eyes, not her own. She has to look for the minutiae, the details that count, like the flinty sharpness in her own eyes, the scar near her chin, the odd mark forming on her cheek, obsessively contrasting them to wide, sweet eyes on a deceptively cherubic face.

Nya wishes–no, not wishes, look where wishing had gotten them all–that Nadakhan had cared to see the differences. Maybe that way, she wouldn't have felt the eyes on her back, always following her, waiting for her to fall into his grasp. Maybe she could have avoided the desperate game of cat-and-mouse. And just maybe, she wouldn't have been grappled into a suffocating gown, or had her agency ripped from her as Dilara took her face, or died–

Right, that had happened. How Cole and Zane go about their days knowing they've walked through the doors of death, she can't begin to fathom. Nya wonders when she'll stop feeling like she has to hide in her own home from eyes that are no longer watching, wonders when she'll stop feeling the white-hot burn of venom leaching into her blood, and it's Dilara's face that brought it upon her.

Nya sets the scissors down, and tries not to flinch at the way they klink against the counter. She doesn't want Dilara's face anymore.

Maybe she'll let it grow out.

It wasn't even that rough of a touch, Nya despairs later. Cole, even in spars, always knew his strength, and he barely glanced her sternum with a ghostly hand as she knocked him off balance.

Apparently, on a bad day, that chilly touch was enough to send the phantom shock of Tiger Widow venom racing through her system; Nya forgot how to breathe for a second, and the next she broke her stance and pushed. Already off-kilter, Cole stumbled, his back hitting the ground with a heavy thud. In the instant before the others could be alarmed, they locked eyes, concerned meeting terrified. She forced her voice to stay even as she said, "I think that's enough training for today." Then she ran.

Now, here she is, her door slammed shut and locked, and her back's pressed against it as she tries to remember what it feels like not to buzz like an entire hornet's nest. She's fine, she repeats to herself. The mantra is soothing simply in its repetitiveness; it gets her mind off of the sensation that won't leave her alone ever since she lived it. She's fine, she's alive, and she's not losing her grip on consciousness because all her organs are shutting down. Nya is fine, not actually feeling the venom seep into her skin through the coarse fabric of the wedding dress, cold for just a millisecond before erupting into white-hot pain across her skin. If her vision is off, it's because of the tears welling up despite her stubborn efforts to blink them away, not the spots that danced across her world as Flintlocke's fatal accident slowly claimed her life-

Her breath catches in a sob. Nya furiously muffles it behind her hand.

It didn't even *happen.* She's been through so much, she's been in danger so many times, and this is the one that sticks? So it killed her, yeah, admittedly that's a big step above the other times, but it hadn't happened to anyone else except her, and Jay, and she can't, won't, make those words leave her lips. Every other problem in her life, she'd risen above, she'd fixed and wrestled back into her control, and then she'd gotten to square her shoulders and quip to the boys how easy it had been.

How does she fix something that's only broken in her memories?

Nya remembers it all.

She almost ~~wishes~~ she didn't.

"*Time Machine*"

PreciousCosmos

Zane reactivates at five o'clock in the morning. He arranges himself, tidies up, and begins his patrol as he has done every day.

It's always the same. Time's ground wears on with two feet marching and two fists swinging, *left, right, left, right, one, zero, one, zero, one.* And two hands of time, in rotation ticking, beat a heart-pulse only he hears. The pulse has always been wrong, like a skipping step just off the cliff's edge or that fist landing only a glance.

Curious. He has never swung his fists.

"*Just a bad dream, Zane. Nothing to worry about,*" his father used to mumble on mornings like this, when the man would wake and seem off himself.

Zane is not meant to dream, either.

But that's what it was, right? The hands never reverse, so the images in his memory banks must be imaginary.

No matter then. They're wonderful images to think about, and they pass the time quickly; the adventure and colors and brotherhood! Oh, he's never had such fun. By all lines of logic, it wasn't a bad dream at all.

Still, each step he takes weighs heavier than the last. He should be experiencing fantastical joy, and yet climbing the staircase feels no different than when he left the basement and couldn't find his father anywhere. His knees scrape the legs beneath them, and his ankles wobble, one leg threatening to give out. Maybe he'll end the patrol early today.

At last, he reaches the main room in the lighthouse, scanning the area for Tai-D. A bit of maintenance would be a better use of this day, but he can't find the little bot. Not under the table, in the closet, down the corridor, or anywhere else. Maybe outside? He goes to one of the windows and leans out, surveying the sharp rocks below.

"It was real, you know," a nearby voice intones. It's attached to a stranger in black somehow sitting at the table, his arms crossed and face hidden by a red visor.

Zane yelps and dives for cover behind his father's drawing board, bashing his knee too hard on the stone. Its cap pops off with a *clink*!

The traitorous thing ends up skittering across the floor, stopping at the stranger's foot. Bending down to pick it up, he hums, "That won't do," then calls, "I can fix this for you if you come out."

Intrigued in spite of himself, Zane peeks and determines that the stranger doesn't seem to mean him harm. "It was...real?" he asks, daring to scoot closer.

His visitor directs him to sit down beside him as he crouches on the floor. "Yes. You detected it. Time's reversal. Something happened that was undone, but I know that didn't escape your clever notice." He observes Zane's knee the entire while that he rambles. "It's what you were built for, after all." He lifts a finger, ticking it side to side as he says, "Tracking the seconds as each one passes."

Zane tilts his head, curious, and states, "I possess an internal chronometer."

Gesturing wide, the mystery man extends his rambling, saying, "You have more than that. So much more. Listen closely. You're gonna play the villain, and they'll hate you for it, but they don't see the world the way we do because we see *everything*. We *know* everything. They have *no idea* what we can do for them. What we're going to do for them. Especially Zane. He's gonna hate you the most, but you can't forget that he's simply envious of your power."

"But..." That does not compute. Zane? "I am Zane."

The mystery man laughs. "How innocent. I hate to break it to you, but you're not. You're the furthest thing from your *perfect*, so beloved brother."

Was he not just giving generous praise? None of this computes at all.

"Oh, trust me. You'll understand soon enough," the man says as if he can read thoughts. "All you have to do is take control. Like so." He hovers his hand above Zane's leg, twirls his fingers, and yellow light glows from them. Then, a miracle happens.

The rust on Zane's kneecap doesn't so much fall away but recede within itself, and the old gray his first memory depicts glimmers back at him.

One hand ticks a perfect synchronization, echoing.

"Who are you?"

"I am simply another ship passing you in the night. And look at that! The next one's right on time."

Zane turns. Destiny sails the air in creaks overhead, drawing closer, as a flash of multicolor light illuminates the window frame. He looks back to find confirmation that he isn't seeing a fictional image, but the mystery man has vanished.

There's no time to worry about that. His strong knee carries him fast down the staircase and to the beach where the flying ship weighs anchor. Two familiar people drop from the chain to meet him.

"Jay! Nya!" he whoops, throwing his arms around their necks.

“Wait, you remember us?” the girl asks.

“Of course!”

“But how? We’re not even sure why we remember and the others don’t.”

He doesn’t really care what she’s talking about. He’s just happy — in two ways. One follows perfect logic. But the other, with the mystery man’s warning so fresh, leaves him feeling relief that it’s only two who came for him.

Jay and Nya are leaving, and they want to take him with them. If he doesn’t ask now, he might not get another chance. “Do not...” he starts, faltering. If he makes this request, won’t he be a coward? But if he changes nothing, then he can keep those good memories and be content.

“What’s wrong, Echo?” Nya prompts.

“Please.” Yes, it’s decided. “Do not tell Zane.”

“Why not?”

“S-scared,” he admits.

“There’s nothing you need to be afraid of, Echo. He’s gonna love you. You know that, right?”

“I– I...” Why is it so hard to put the reason into words?

Ten, fully aligned ticks pass while she searches his eyes. At length, she looks away like she can’t find what she’s looking for in him, but it’s within herself instead. She turns to Jay making some kind of face at her, takes his hand, and then sighs, saying, “Okay, it’ll be our secret. Until we’re all ready to tell them.”

He receives less than a handful of visits from them over the course of the next few months until finally,one late evening, they explain to him that it’s too difficult keeping the secret like this. That he would be safer if he were closer to them. Truthfully, maybe he’s a little tired of the lighthouse and its hollow reverberations anyway.

The old couple that he – along with Tai-D – goes to live with have temperaments that remind him of his father, and Jay says he can trust them, that they’ll take good care of him. He keeps saying that like Zane needs to be convinced. He trusts Jay, and soon, he trusts them just as much. Loves them. He loves helping them.

“Ooh, you’re quite the speedy one, Mr. Echo,” the kind mother praises from her place in the front seat of her shared vehicle.

The scrapyard required a great amount of organization today, and Zane found his progress to be too slow. So he went faster. By nightfall now, everything has its place. He grins at her, shaking the dirt from his apron, a plume of smoke and green light bursting from it.

“An’ here we thought Jay was the fastest of the bunch,” the gentle father agrees, wrench in hand, as he pushes up away from the engine he’s been working on all day. Returning to it, he tightens some remaining bolts. “Okay, Edna, give it a whirl.”

The mother complies, but the vehicle makes no roaring sound like Zane knows it’s supposed to.

“Darn it,” the father exclaims, scratching his head with the wrench. “I just don’t think she’ll ever start again, hun.”

Frowning, Zane hangs up his apron and shuffles over to the vehicle. Patting the frame, he asks, “Why won’t she?”

“Ah, honey, that’s just how things go,” the mother answers. “You can give them all the love in the world, but cars get old, and they break down.”

“We got a lot of good years out of her, though.”

The two reminisce about the past, but Zane remains quiet, thinking hard. He concludes that if aging is the problem, then logically, a reversal of the process must be the solution.

“‘Like so,’” he mumbles, yellow light blooming under his fingertips.

Two nights later, he lies curled under the shiny, pristine car and listens to its soft purr instead of the wild conversation happening less than ten feet away from him. Tai-D beeps small comforts in his arms, but soon its programming calls it to serve tea to the guests.

Nya and Jay have come for a visit. He had been so excited to meet them again, but they brought the old man with the longest beard he’s ever seen as well as a different pair of strangers. The expressions on their faces scared him, so he hid before they saw him. It seems like that was pointless.

“We already know what happens when two share this power. We have no idea the damage a single person possessing it can cause,” the man almost shouts, drawing Zane’s unwilling attention. “It’s too powerful!”

“I understand your misgivings,” the old one responds, “but I believe that if destiny chose him, it must be for a reason. If he is anything like his brother, he has a good heart.”

“Why take that chance, Wu?” the woman says. “We still have an ingot of chronosteel. If we use it now, before he manifests his true potential, maybe it will be enough.” Her voice could be pleasant were it not so rushed and full of worry.

“But that’s not fair to him. He helped us,” Nya bursts.

Jay chimes in with, “Yeah, I couldn’t have done anything without him back then.”

It calms Zane to hear his friends defend him. He just wishes he knew what they’re defending him from.

“Sweetheart, you told me yourself that that timeline doesn’t exist anymore. How do you know he’ll act with the same heroism?”

“Why are you so sure he’s evil?” Nya retorts.

“I didn’t say he was, but I have to think about what might be best.”

“Maybe nobody having powers would be what’s best, but you can’t do that, so you can’t do it to him, Dad!”

A heavy silence fills the space until the old one continues, “Every elemental master has the potential to use their power for evil, but history proves that most use it for good. With the proper training, he could–”

The vehicle’s engine suddenly pops right in Zane’s ear, followed by the muffler falling off, its entire state returning to the aged, dead shell from before, only worse. The tires follow, almost dropping an axel on top of him, but he rolls to safety. And right into everyone’s view. Wide-eyed, they stare at each other.

“Aw, there she goes,” Ed laments, breaking the long moment.

“Come here, Echo,” Nya gently commands. “Eavesdropping is rude, especially when you should be part of this.”

The couple who hate him appear nervous, their lips tight and eyes looking anywhere but at him.

He isn’t afraid. He’s a hero. Still, he stammers, “I– I– Did I do– I don’t know what I did wrong.”

“You didn’t do anything,” she assures.

“It was gonna wear off anyway,” Jay adds.

Zane’s about to ask what he means, but the bearded man, Wu, approaches him.

“Hello. We have not properly met.”

“H-hello. I am Zane. I am built–”

“To protect those who cannot protect themselves,” Wu finishes for him with a strange, fond smile. He reaches out to Zane and places a warm hand on his shoulder. “You have been given a gift as well as a great responsibility. You must not abuse it or treat it carelessly. Can you understand that?”

“Yes,” he answers on impulse. He can at least endeavor to try.

Nya and Jay tell him they can’t keep the secret anymore after that, so in return, they give him a third home and a second mind. The latter he’s especially grateful for. It’s easier to process, now.

He finds reading to be the most enjoyable pastime, and his master’s library is quite extensive. His brother often expounds on the virtue of understanding science and history, and yes, yes, he does study what he’s expected to. But it’s philosophy and the psychology of humans that holds the stronger grasp. A particular line of reasoning keeps him up all night.

Stones know nothing of time or space, of sun or water, and hold no memory in themselves. Around them grow the plants who love the energy they drink and care nothing for the space they dwell in. Animals know love, too, for their families, but they don’t remember ages past or feel the turning of the world.

But humans are aware of it all and yet nothing at the same time, trapped. Stuck to walk earth’s ground on a single line until the very end. Time-bound. He doesn’t want to be like that anymore.

So it doesn’t matter that he must steal from Ninjago’s history to unlock his true potential. It doesn’t matter that the mystery man was right. It doesn’t even matter if he dies. None of it can bind him.

Zane may use his cold, unforgiving titanium and crystalized potential itself to protect those who cannot protect themselves, but his echo is made of doom-wrought iron with time’s great spinning mechanism for a heart.

He knows who he is. He’s a *cut* above the rest.

Just a few days after Echo begins his training, Zane receives a request to come down to the police station.

“Thank you for coming,” the commissioner says, meeting him at the front.

“Of course. Your call seemed urgent.”

“It’s a matter of interest, sure.” Along the way to his office, the commissioner explains, “A couple of my guys were running an investigation out at the landfill – ahem, long story – when they happened to find it. We weren’t sure what to make of it, but I figure it wouldn’t be hard for the princess to tap into one of the nindroid army’s old evildoing ways.”

Disturbed, Zane asks, “What leads you to believe that?”

“You’ll see,” the man sighs, opening his door and allowing Zane to enter first.
What is clearly a match to the black biker helmet Mr. E never removed sits on the desk. Zane closes the distance to it. Unusually hesitant, he grasps it, refraining from lifting it out of view. A second later, he exhales, resigning himself to what he will finally learn and the convoluted misery that comes after.

VINCENT

Solobodor

THE LEGO
NINJAGO
SEISHI

THREE
SISTERS
THREE
QUEENS

"Forge of Fire"

PurpleRose244

Ray breathed in deeply, for the fifth time now, taking in the smell of rust of the Four Weapons, grinning as a drop of sweat caressed his temple. He had spent years working as a blacksmith under the Hands of Times' eyes, yet here this was different. Soothing even.

"It's a little dustier than I remember." His eyes weren't supposed to leave the iron heating up inside the forge, but it was hard to keep up his professionalism without peaking around, catching new details. "Which is fair, all things considered." The photos scattered all over, the first armor he had ever made still hanging in that corner, shinier creations hanging on the walls alternated to the ones he and Maya had made in youth.

And the young man standing by his side, checking on their tools.

"This is a bad day actually, me and Nya usually clean up the shop every once in a while." Kai shrugged, holding up a chisel with a pensive look before putting it down. "I guess we got busy, between ghosts and agglomerates of snakes taking over." He had been pretty upbeat looking ever since they got here, that natural smirk with the slight frown of his eyebrows.

If it hadn't it been for the mask, back at the blacksmith station in the Vermillion Swamp, Ray was sure he would had recognized him immediately. They smiled exactly the same.

The blacksmith hummed, furrowing his forehead.

"Wait, ghosts? Did that happen before the Tournament of Elements?"

"After, it's long story." Why was that the starting point of all discussions regarding his children's adventures? "First we need to get Ronin to tell you about that time he stole our memories, it's hard for us to be accurate since… well, he stole our memories. We're good now though, man that was a weird one!" That sounded like a major understatement. Then again, apparently that wasn't the most shocking experience of his. "How's the base going?"

Oh. He almost forgot about it. That hadn't happened in years. Ray smiled, as he checked onto the ruby colored metal, concluding that he still got it. Which was a bit of a given after years.

"We're good to go. Anything in mind?"

"I was thinking of a sword? A present for our recently promoted master Lloyd." Kai scratched the back of his head. "I know he doesn't like how things had turned out, but I'd like to let him know that he's not a replacement, definitely not alone in this. And that he'll make a great sensei." That was Maya. Although the clumsiness at opening up was definitely a characteristic of masters of fire, something sweeter and gentler of his wife had come to the mix. And it was lovely.

"That's a nice thought." The boy shrugged, trying to regain some cool distant composure. Back to be his son. "It's a bit weird to hear that you have so many friends now, and one is even Lord Garmadon's kid." Weird, but not by much. After all, Ray hadn't been around to witness his dark empire. All he did was fight alongside an obscure figure with honor in his heart. "You used to be so skeptic towards others, always spending all of your time with your sister."

Kai snickered, turning to the closet where they kept the materials to make hilts. The sudden cough, as dust fell over, told him that that also needed a brush up.

"Garmadon wasn't so bad, at least not all the time. And Lloyd was an annoying brat, sure, but not evil. Although to be fair, we were all pretty annoying. Some of us still are, coff coff Jay." He turned to him, showing a little grin. "And I told you before. They're not my friends. They're my *brothers*."

Right, there was that too.

His kids got a brand-new family.

Ray nodded, sighing into a smile, bringing the scorching cylinder of iron onto the anvil. Years of experience had given him almost the immunity to such heat; at the beginning of his path as the master of fire, he used to keep the red-hot materials in his hands without gloves or problems. Now that a new generation was arising, he could feel the years on his back. And he most definitely needed tongs now.

He gestured for his son to come closer.

"How do you feel about a broadsword? Then you can carve his name on it."

"Dad, that's a great idea!" Kai beamed at him, bringing along the hammer immediately, getting a little unsure over the hold before starting to hit the metal. "Huh, it's been a while. I haven't really done much since I became a ninja."

"Saving the world doesn't give you much time to be a blacksmith?"

"You got the right idea." He snickered, giving consistent bumps all over. "It's like, the moment I got the red suit, all of Ninjago decided to get in troubles! And then boom, Lord Garmadon, the Great Devourer, and boom again, the Overlord! But how about a break? Nope, boom, the Overlord again!" He stopped when the metal started to get cold, and Ray promptly put it back in the forge. "I mean, it's not all bad. Adventures, action, fun. Sure we have to deal with a couple of knuckleheads that think they're entitled to the entire world, but pummel an idiot is pretty satisfying, you know?"

"Absolutely." This old blacksmith had his glory days literally roasting very annoying butts. They were definitely on the same page. "This isn't exactly what I envisioned for you and your sister when you were kids, but if it works for you it works for me." He put the metal back on the anvil. And raised his eyes on a suddenly frowny young master of fire. "… does it?"

“Huh? Oh, yes, definitely.” Kai shook his head, getting back with the hammer. Blinking a few times more than necessary. “I love being a ninja, I love our adventures. And I love my family.” He stopped for a second, sighing. “I guess… it just got a little harder having it all lately.”
Ray narrowed his eyes at him as he resumed the work. There were many years he needed to catch up with before trying to guess his son’s thoughts. But they were similar. And he wanted to listen.

“What do you mean?”

“… we told you that we lost Zane once, right? Back at the second confrontation with the Overlord?” The man nodded. The one brother who was a robot. Oh, no, *nindroid*. Like every single ninja had reminded him insistently. “Lately adventures have the annoying habit of ending without the whole team back together. Sure we got Zane back, but sensei Garmadon is gone. We almost lost Lloyd more times than I can count. I’ve been dreaming about losing Nya a lot lately, almost as it actually happened.” Kai stared at the steaming metal, his eyes reflecting the red. “And now Wu is who knows where. I like my life, I really do. But it’s… hard, sometimes.”

It was like a mirror, in some way. A perfectly reflective blade, different in material, but same in shape. Ray put the metal into the forge again, then faced the boy. Imagining a more build up body sitting at his place, with bristled black hair and a touch of beard, that after years of a naturally temperamental attitude had finally started to care about people.

“You know, once back when I was in the Alliance of the Elements, I almost lost your mother.” His son widened his eyes at him. The previous master of fire waited for the sword to reheat and then took it out, allowing Kai to resume the work. “We couldn’t get along between masters. I only knew Wu and Maya, and the others were prideful warriors that didn’t want anyone to tell them what to do… me included.” He let out a little snicker, sighing. “One day, while Earth and were arguing over something I can’t really remember anymore, Water and Lighting were taken.”

Kai breathed out, his hits with the hammer more precise than before. It seemed he had gotten back the rhythm he had lost through these years of inactivity.

“Mom and Jay’s ancestor?” Ray hadn’t told him. He hadn’t told him that Libber had been around Maya’s age back then, and it was unlikely that there was someone else after her as a direct predecessor of the current master of lightning. Because he heard about Jay’s current parents. Cliff and Libber weren’t them. And it felt like a complicated family matter he didn’t have a voice in.

So he simply nodded, moving the blade with the tongs, allowing an easier work.

“We made a truce, found out the group of Constrictai that took them and… well, let me tell you, burned serpentine’s skin smells awful.” He managed to break a laugh out of him, thankfully. “When I found your mother, covered in dirt and bruises, I thought I failed altogether. As a man, as a warrior, as a master… but she looked at me in the eyes, and told me to have this moment as a lesson, not as a threat. To remember that destiny is terrifying, but that doesn’t mean fear is our destiny. Because we can adapt to it, be flexible. And go with the flow.” Ray snickered, shaking his head. “It was so hard for me to understand, apparently it’s a master of water thing.”

Kai smirked as well, turning the blade around as it was finally looking more like the desired product. Red sparks were floating all around.

“Yeah, I heard something similar from Nya once.”

“It’s good advice. But maybe a little harder to accept for the two of us. Our element has a life itself. To adapt, you need to see clearly, and a master of fire tends to live with smoke in the eyes. But that’s what make us experience everything so intensely.” He picked up the sword, rotating it to check the form. “You and your sister can live the fire way, or the water way, or your own way. It’s all about balance at the end. That’s the secret of a meaningful life.”
He had missed this confidentiality in the forge. It used to be his and his father’s only way to communicate. Hopefully, on light of all the time lost between them, Ray wasn’t crossing a line about forwardness.

It stopped to matter at the sudden sniff. In the light of the forge his son’s tears shined right away. Ray almost let go of the metal right there, to move, run to him, comfort him. But he was still the man that had been gone for so long, and he felt like he couldn’t afford that just yet.
Kai rubbed his eyes with his arm, shaking his head.

“Ah, what the, I-I don’t know why I’m getting like this all of the sudden…”

“Did I say something-”

“Of course not, no! You listened to me and then dropped a major pearl of wisdom while I was feeling bummed, it was really cool!” He swallowed, sobbing through a smile. “And we’re here talking, making something together, and you’re being a father which is something I haven’t had for years, and I guess I’m a little… I don’t know, overwhelmed?” The smile fell, with more tears. “I’m… I’m sorry, dad.” He covered his eyes in shame.

At this point, boundaries didn’t matter. Not when his kid was feeling awful and sad while crying in front of him. Ray barely felt himself leaving the sword in the bucket and standing up, putting his hands on his young shoulders, flaming eyes evading him.

“What are you apologizing for?”

“… I didn’t trust you.” Finally, Kai looked up, directly at him. “When Krux told me you and mom were traitors, I doubted you. Even while all you did was protect me and Nya, I let you down after the first word from a random bad guy.” His son completely dived in when it was about feelings. The good ones, and the bad ones. “I attacked you when I saw you again. I didn’t care if I hurt you, I just wanted you to pay… even years of wishing for you and mom to come back.” He cried a laugh, shaking his head. “Why am I saying this? I don’t even… I’m-” Apologies didn’t suit him. Submission, regret, pain, none of that. It looked awful on him.

Ray decided that he could let his own flaming carelessness take over, and hugged his son. He felt him stiffen, just for a second, before sniffing harder than before.

“Ash?” The sobs stopped, and it made him smile. They used to call him that when he was so very little, it had always made him put a hilariously disgruntled face. Sometimes, it had been the only way to get his little hyperactive one’s attention. “Kai, we’ve been apart more than we’ve been together, don’t blame yourself for having doubts about a man you haven’t seen in years.”
His figure between his arms was taller, more robust. More mature. He instinctively held him closer. “What matter is from now on, so that next time you won’t have a single doubt. So don’t blame yourself… after all, if I had been in your shoes, I would’ve chopped my dad’s head off right away.”

Hearing his son's laugh really was the biggest blessing of his life.

"You shouldn't condone this behavior, you're the parent here."

"I'm a fire dad with a fire son, it's the least you should expect." Not like it was a mystery that Maya and Nya were three quarters of their impulse control.

His son leaned into his arms, breathing quietly.

"I lost my way when you were gone. I'm so happy you're here." And Ray couldn't answer that, not with that lump into his throat, He just clung onto his son. Taking everything in. "… huh, dad?" Suddenly Kai sniffed. Without tears. "Did you leave the sword in the water?"

"Of course no- I left the sword in the water!!" The shame right there made him jump as athletically as he used to be, right over the bucket. And as he raised their creation, it immediately fell into pieces that plopped back into the water. He sighed a very unenthusiastic breath. More than fifty years of blacksmithing, all to get a crumbling sword. In front of his son. If only he could burn everything away like he used to.

But Kai was snickering at the poor relic. Turning towards the counter. Taking another piece to start all over again. Looking content, proud even.

And if it wasn't an amazing color on him.

"You cooled it down too much, what do you know. I usually have the opposite problem." Kai extended the metal cylinder towards him, beaming. "Like you said, it's all about balance."

Ray grinned at him. It was so good to be home.

ZOROFLY

ERROR
DECODED

"*Unruly Heart*"

Fouroreos

Cole's heart was a bit unruly.

See, he wasn't the most expressive, or enthusiastic, or loudest person. He kept his thoughts to himself more or less. He was specifically reserved. At least, that's what he had thought of himself until a certain someone named Jay stepped foot through those giant, monastery doors.

Of course, later he met Zane, and suddenly, being the most stubborn and closed off individual of the group wasn't his role to bear anymore. But that was completely beside the point.

So what was the point?

The point was, Cole hadn't truly felt like he had been the best version of himself until Jay arrived.

Although he could be slightly, terribly annoying, and perhaps a tad bit of a headache, that still didn't derive from the fact that Jay was a joy. Being around the fella was like a hel-luva rollercoaster ride. One minute, there you were, at the bottom of the tracks all cool and collected. Then the next? Jay was all over the place, sending the coaster in unpredictable zig-zags, and up and down.

Suffice to say, Jay was one of the only people in the entire land of Ninjago who could make him laugh. Even if not the biggest smile, or the biggest laugh, Jay would catch it, and he would gloat about it nonstop.

"You found my joke funny!" He'd point out, or sometimes even the constant reminder of, "I saw that smile" when so-and-so happened, proving the point that deep down, Cole was just a big old softie.

But mostly, a big old softie for Jay. Admittedly.

And that, exactly, was the problem. It was the reason Cole's heart was being so disruptive and so… difficult to control.

Everyday he told himself that Jay wouldn't - no, *didn't* like him back. That the two of them were just friends. After all, Jay had been head over heels, infatuated with Nya ever since Kai first spoke her name. Or rather, the words "my sister". No way did Cole stand a chance confessing anything to Jay.

Which was why one day, when Lloyd had asked for someone to pick up some supplies for Pixal's new project, Cole couldn't begin to describe the feelings that had accumulated when Jay asked to tag along with him. It was a strange feeling. One that had been lurking around the past several months. Yet, one he hadn't quite bothered to acknowledge up till now.

It was the slight brush of Jay's hand against his when Cole went to fetch the umbrella to shield them from the rain which sent a chill up Cole's spine. This sort of tingly feeling etched its way onto his cheeks and he puffed them with air, hoping Jay wouldn't notice.

It was the way the two of them were walking so close to one another, huddling under the umbrella to keep from getting wet as they made their journey to New Ninjago City.

The way Jay passed the time by telling stories Cole, or anyone else, for that matter, did not need to know. And they way Cole's heart couldn't help but do somersaults in his chest as Jay's laughter flooded his ears.

His hand is really warm, came a thought as Jay's fingers slipped under his, wrapped around the umbrella stick. This caused Cole to grimace.

"Remind me again how you got that eyebrow notch of yours? It was something about an invention of yours and lightning, wasn't it? The one when you were five." The master of earth spoke up all too suddenly, disrupting his thoughts from going any further.

Jay simply lifted his head, looking to Cole with big eyes. A smile flashed across his face. "I literally just told you that story for like, the fifteenth time yesterday, you big goof."

Well, shoot, Cole said in his head. Of course Jay had told that story before. And of course, he had to pick that one. Cole had practically memorized every single event of that tragedy. Because yes, he hadn't forgotten it. And not just because Jay had told him that story over a dozen times, but because he liked it.

Just like he liked Jay.

With a shrug, Cole spoke softly, "Yeah, well, I've been becoming a little too forgetful lately. Tell me again?"

And for a bit, Jay looked like he was pondering the thought of it. Telling a story that had been already shared? Well, it certainly wasn't something Jay *wouldn't* do. But they were quickly interrupted when the two of them finally stopped in front of the supply store.

"Remind me on the way back," Jay told him as he opened the door, holding it open for the other. Wringing out the umbrella, Cole shuffled his way inside as Jay followed suit.

Unfortunately for Cole, their time inside the shop wasn't very long. And Cole had hoped it would have been longer, giving him the time to sort his feelings and whatnot away from the cause of all of it: Jay.

Apparently, Lloyd had already placed the order ahead of time, and the shopkeeper already had everything prepared in a giant, water proofed, bag. Now he really saw why Lloyd had been questioning Jay when the blue ninja opted to tag along with Cole.

If he remembered correctly, the words Lloyd had spoken to Jay were something along the lines of, “It’s really not a long trip. Just a quick pick me up and back.”

But Jay had *insisted* on coming along. Why? Cole had no idea. The master of lightning chose to reserve that part of the decision to himself. Yet, Cole’s unruly heart was a bit curious, and he hoped that maybe Jay was feeling the same way as he did. However, a voice inside him was telling him no, and that Jay was just in need of some time away from certain people.

Right, Cole bit his lip. Jay and Nya had broken up a couple days ago. Then some days after, he and Kai had gotten into a bit of a fight. And while the hot-headed fire ninja did admit that he was overreacting a bit, his words still left a slight burn on Jay.

Cole wished he had been there for Jay when he needed it.

Out of nowhere, Cole felt some*one* grab onto his hand. Daring to look down, he saw Jay holding tightly onto the bag of supplies. With a gulp, Cole led them outside and opened the umbrella.

The walk back was a little quiet at first. Cole didn’t dare bring up reminding Jay of the story of his notched eyebrow. And Jay didn’t quite seem to delve into it either, knowing for a fact that neither of them had forgotten Cole asking about it earlier.

“What’s in the bag?” Cole asked, breaking the awkward silence.

The smaller ninja held it up to his eyes and looked it over, squinting. “Some brushes and paints.” He pursed his lips, dropping his arm immediately. “Wonder what Pixal’s planning on using them for.”

He kicked the ground sadly. “Hey, um.” Jay closed his mouth, eyes searching the paved sidewalk for answers as they moved through the rain. “Why did you ask to hear that story again? You know, the one about the eyebrow? I know you know it. What’s the deal?”

Cole’s eyes widened, but he quickly shook it off, trying to play it cool.

“I told you, I’m just a bit forgetful. Entertain me.”

“Nah. You were very specific earlier when you asked. You *definitely* know it. So tell me. What’s up?”

Cole blinked. Oh FSM, was he such a screw up.

“I didn’t want you to think I wasn’t listening earlier when you were telling all your other stories and jokes,” he defended.

“Oh *come on*, that’s definitely a lie too. You are such a bad liar. Honestly. I bet you just really like my stories. It’s okay to admit you like me.” Jay joked and chuckled, jabbing him in the shoulder playfully.

As Jay laughed, Cole thought of a way to snipe back at him. One that would turn the tables and put the beloved master of lightning on the spot instead of him. “Why are you holding my hand, then?”

And Cole swore he could feel the heat radiating off of the blue ninja. He stammered, instantly letting go of Cole’s hand and shoving it into his pocket. Mini regret quickly washed over the black ninja, and Cole longed to feel Jay again. The loss of warmth was suffocating.

“Um - uh.” Jay cleared his throat. “You’re warm.”

Hesitation.

“It’s warm. I’m cold.” Jay wrinkled his nose, jabbing a finger at Cole’s chest. “No, no, no, no, no. You don’t get to do that to me! I asked you a question first and you just completely avoided it and asked me something else instead. How *dare* you?”

If it wasn’t for the rain, Cole would have thrown both hands over his stomach and laughed until his stomach hurt. Jay was trying to pull a serious face and using a mocking, somewhat patronizing tone. But Cole wasn’t buying any of it.

“Hey, come on, man. You were the one who said it was okay to admit that I liked you.” Cole then proceeded to reach for the hand Jay had so quickly pulled away. “You were holding my hand to and back. It’s okay for you to admit you like me… *Do* you like me?”

Jay hung his head, speaking softly in hopes that Cole wouldn’t hear him. “Yeah. I do.”

To Cole’s luck, and Jay’s demise, he did in fact hear. But Cole simply took it as a joke. He laughed a bit at first, though his heart ached and yearned for it to be true in the way he wanted it to be.

Until Jay curled his hand tighter.

“Uh…” Cole’s laughter died as he looked at Jay. “Something the matter?”

“I wasn’t joking,” Jay deadpanned, hiding his eyes behind a mop of his damp hair.

It was then, Cole’s heart nearly stopped. “What?”

In one swift motion, Jay pulled him and Cole off the sidewalk and onto the muddy grass, keeping the umbrella high above them. “I said, I wasn’t joking. You thought I was joking, didn’t you?”

“I, uh… I mean…” *Not entirely*, he finished silently.

Jay took a deep breath, daring to look up at Cole. “I want to tell you everything, so badly. The real reason Nya and I broke up. Why Kai and I got into a petty argument. But I thought, if I told you the real reason behind it all. The real reason why I wanted to come with you. That, I dunno, maybe you just wouldn’t look at me the same way anymore…”

And Jay was speaking so fast that all his words began to mush together until it all became one big jumble of words that sounded so much like Jay speaking gibberish. Though the one thing that Cole had been able to catch. The one thing that Cole had heard because of how clearly Jay had said it was, “The bottom line is… I like you.”

Cole's unruly heart began to beat faster.

No way. He had to be imagining things.

"Not a joke." Jay spoke up when Cole hadn't said anything for over a minute.

"You're… you're serious?" Jay nodded shyly.

"Dead serious." Jay backed away slowly, still holding onto Cole's hand. "Please don't hate me."

Another moment where Cole felt like he was imagining things. "Hate you?" He took a step forward, the umbrella tipping over ever so slightly, letting the rain fall between them. "Jay, I don't hate you."

For a split second, Cole saw a smile break across Jay's face. Yet, it was quickly replaced with that same frown from earlier when Jay had begun to panic and freak. That was the type of Jay he hated seeing the most.

"You don't hate me? But, hah, this doesn't make things any less awkward?" Jay's voice was a bit shaky. Another thing Cole hated.

In hopes of reassuring Jay and letting him know that everything was all right between them still, he uprighted the umbrella and made a move. Jay was certainly taken aback, but he didn't dare twitch. A part of him wanted to see where Cole was going with all of it just as the master of earth leaned down to press his lips against his.

Both Jay and Cole felt their hearts ease once they pulled away, big, happy, grins slapped on both their faces.

"Oh, well. I guess the only other awkward thing here is that, I like you too."

SHORTYMCCHEDO

NINJAGO

SONS OF GARMADON

NINJAGO

Masters of Spinjitzu

NINJAGOXART_ 2020

@Hejitzmatze

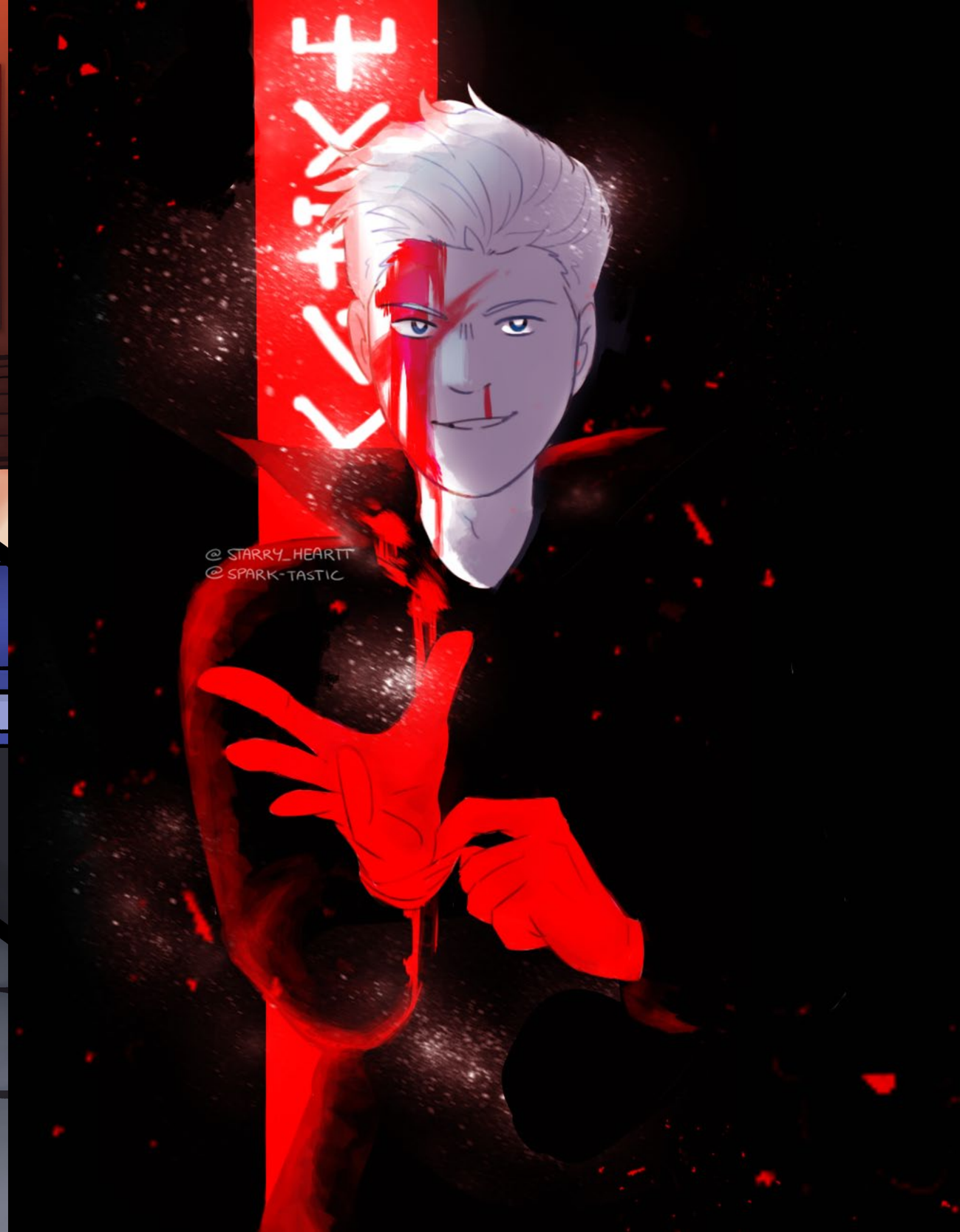
PREZ

SG

103

you trust me, right lloyd?

TheUltimateUltimateWeapon@tumblr-TUUWArt@twitter


@STARRY_HEARTT
@SPARK-TASTIC

"*Dear Me*"

Dreame

Dear me,

Lloyd paused and studied the beginning. An eraser soon scrubbed the two words from the page, leaving behind faded outlines of the letters. He chewed his pencil for a moment before carefully trying another phrase.

Dear younger me,

"That sounds like a song," he muttered as he erased those words too. Their faded indentations joined the other failed attempts.

Late afternoon sun trickled onto the lined notebook paper. The green ninja sighed dramatically and stubbornly rested his head in his arms on the desk. *This assignment is stupid*, he thought, chewing on the pencil again.

After a tiring round of sunrise exercises, Wu had pulled his "prized" student aside and instructed/forced the boy to write a letter to a younger version of Lloyd. Which was dumb, Lloyd had noted, since he was technically still young. But, his uncle had brushed the comment off with a thwack on the boy's head from his bamboo "sensei staff" and directed Lloyd to write.

As the others played videogames and hung out, free from their protector duties for a few precious hours, Lloyd was stuck in his room attempting (and failing) to produce something that would please Wu enough. Homework. How ironic.

Even now, he could hear Jay's electric laughter slice across the courtyard, soon harmonizing with Nya's trickling snort-laugh and Zane's metallic chuckle.

Footsteps approached Lloyd's thin door and paused. The shuffling was followed by a soft, rhythmic pattern. "Come in," Lloyd called to his older brother, huffing quietly afterwards.

Cole pushed the sliding door aside, struggling slightly to force it open as it caught on the same old position. "You should fix that," he noted. "I never have time to," Lloyd countered saltily.

Cole stepped in, waving a peace offering of- "Is that candy?" Lloyd immediately perked up, his tongue tingling and his jade eyes sparkling with newfound energy.

Large, muscular hands pawned over the bag to eager, smaller paws in exchange for the right to sit on the edge of the bed occupying the center of the room.

Lloyd tore into the gift and fished out the gummies. His dragon-like teeth wrestled with the chewy texture. "How's the letter coming?" Cole asked after watching his little brother quietly for a few minutes.

Almost immediately, the boy's face darkened. "That bad, huh?" Lloyd nodded. Cole shifted positions and involuntarily stroked the stubble creeping onto his chin, caused by a lack of motivation to shave. "Wu made me write one once. It took me a week until it felt finished."

Lloyd's face displayed terrified disgust and Cole quickly rephrased his comment. "Of course, my standards might be a bit different than yours." The green ninja swiveled around in his chair to face the earth ninja. "How'd you do it?" he asked through a mouthful of candy.

"I'm used to keeping myself motiva-" "What did you put in the letter?" Lloyd interrupted for clarity. Cole thought for a second. "Think of questions you had when you were a kid about your future self and go from there," he advised. "I still am a kid," came the retort.

Cole ignored the comeback and continued. "It doesn't even have to be good. You can always go back and edit, or write another draft." "I have to write multiple letters?" Lloyd panicked. Cole chuckled. "Don't be surprised if it comes to that."

A small ping filled the room, followed by shuffling as Cole fished a phone and reading glasses out of his hoodie pocket. "We'll eat late; try to answer three questions before then," he challenged.

He stopped to rumple the youngster's blond mop, earning several exclamations of protest. Then, he left the room.

Lloyd turned back to the paper and rewrote "Dear Me". He tapped his pencil on his desk rhythmically, now more energetic from the sugar burst.

Everyone probably hates you right now, and you're wondering what you're worth and if you're even worth anything. You are. In the future, you get a loving family. You have a home, where no one tries sabotaging your bed.

A memory trickled into Lloyd's mind, and he quickly added: *unless it's April Fools, Revenge Pranks, or Uncle Wu.*

He shuddered, remembering when he swiped Jay's prized first-edition Fritz Donnegan Issue #278. The sparkles had taken weeks to wash out of his hair, sheets, and clothes, earning Lloyd the title of Master of Disco. Even though the trick was at least 3 months ago, he still found wayward glitter in strange places.

He re-read what he wrote and glanced at a set of photos to his left.

One showed him and his siblings armed for laser tag. His team had consisted of Kai and Jay in an epic battle against Nya, Zane, and Cole. Short Stacks ended up miserably failing, despite Kai's intense sibling competitiveness, Jay's skills, and Lloyd's mischievousness. Rock Solid was clearly overpowered with Nya's fury, Cole's strength, and Zane's nindroid... ness? Powers? Lloyd shrugged and continued reliving the memory.

Still, the day ended with lots of joking (and light arguing, quickly ended by Nya), a sweaty group of ninjas, and ice cream.

The picture below it was from The Royal Blacksmiths' Reunion Tour. Each person was dressed sharply, a picture Kai dubbed as their "secret agents infiltrating a high-class party" look. In fact, while taking the picture, Kai had made the comment, and each ninja strove to capture the expression.

Zane looked collected and serious, while Cole looked more like a guard. Jay struck an overly dramatic pose, and Kai went for more of a "cocky and obscenely rich" type of agent. All agreed that Nya looked the best with her death glare, an expression Lloyd had attempted to copy, but ended up looking adorably innocent.

The performance at Marti Oppenheimer was excellent, but the best part had been smuggling poor Cole away from several upset and concerned teachers.

The final image was a newspaper clipping from after the Final Battle. Lloyd smiled slightly at his short hair, and the reflection of his now-long hair grinned back at him. As always, Jay *had* to be dramatic, opting to lay across the ground instead of standing with the rest.

The gray hair of his father sparked an idea.

It's good to want to be like Dad, but make sure it's the right version of him.

A small tear slipped onto the paper and the rest that attempted to follow were quickly brushed away by a silk sleeve. The shattered glass from his favorite picture scarred the image, but didn't hide what was underneath.

Lloyd carefully picked up the frame and looked at his sensei-slash-dad.

Mystake's words about Lloyd transforming also applied to Garmadon, Lloyd realized. His father had taken many forms, maybe even more than the green ninja. First came son of the First Spinjitzu Master, then victim of the Great Devourer. Followed by student of Chen and husband of…

Lloyd brushed aside that role, his anger returning as he thought of his mother, who was currently on yet another trip.

Instead, he refocused on his father.

Much of his childhood had been spent striving to live up to the legacy of Lord Garmadon. Attending a "school for bad boys" didn't help much with that dream nor did opening the Serpentine tombs and temporarily befriending Pythor. Lloyd was pretty sure he still had his old hoodie with the sloppily painted ribcage.

Secretly, Lloyd dubbed this version as "the *nice* Lord Garmadon", as opposed to "the evil Lord Garmadon" summoned by The Quiet One. The latter version was nearly completely consumed by darkness, and held no love for Lloyd whatsoever.

The version Lloyd loved the most was Sensei Dad. As a teacher, Garmadon had provided much wisdom. As a father, Garmadon had done his best to reconcile for his actions and sought to create a bond with the man Lloyd had become. Both had to learn to live in the present, instead of recreating a better past.

Not that Lloyd minded playing catch, the ill-fated fishing trip, or the week spent living in the blanket fort. He enjoyed every moment with Sensei Garmadon. Even cleaning up broken dishes. He laughed a watery chuckle at each memory, then stood and grabbed a tissue, somber happiness blanketing him.

He opened the drawer where his pile of letters written to the late son of the First Spinjitzu Master lay. He sneezed. Dust floated through the air.

Glancing back at his paragraph, Lloyd scribbled a more childish comment aimed at a certain someone.

Most girls are terrible, with very few exceptions. Keep them out of your treehouse. Maybe your life too.

He erased the last sentence, realizing he'd probably regret it later.

Don't date princesses named Harumi.

"Perfect," he muttered.

More painful memories drifted through his mind, slowly weighing him down. Deeper and darker they went. Lies trickled into his head, whispered softly and flirtatiously into his ear. A chill crawled down his spine. He pushed the voice aside and stubbornly focused on her last moments.

"She was never corrected," he reminded himself shakily.

A box of carefully hidden fears unlocked itself, allowing more voices to haunt him.

"Y*ou could have been like me. You* should *have been like me,*" Harumi whispered, donning the mask of hatred. "*Never could do it alone, could you?*" Morro jeered, towering above him. "*This is your legacy,*" the Overlord crooned in his dragon form.

The words haunted him every day.

He called out to his family, but they never came.

Tears stained the paper and his sleeves and snot dribbled down his chin.

"Hey, hey, hey." Nya's soothing voice and strong arms wrapped around him. She protected him from any outside menaces, namely electric chickens and any inconvenient attacks, as he sobbed away internal ones.

He was still scared.

But he wasn't alone.

Gradually, his tears dried out and his heart calmed, leaving him with a few hiccups and a worried big sister. She glanced at the desk. “Writing your letter?” “Did you write one?” he asked, wiping his red nose on his sleeve.

“Even PIXAL wrote one. We all ended up crying,” she told him, fishing around in her pockets for a tissue. Lloyd’s voice got younger and more childlike as he spoke. “Then why do we have to write them?”

She thought for a moment. “I think Wu wants us to cry, so we can face our fears and be better fighters and ninjas. A lot of Spinitzu moves are based on not being afraid. And it makes us better people.”

“I don’t feel better,” Lloyd grumbled through a stuffy nose. Nya half-smiled. “Well, it’ll make a difference later. You’ll see.”

“Is dinner ready?” he asked, changing the subject abruptly, pasting on a fake grin. She studied him. *It wasn’t fair, Wu. Why would you hurt him so young?*

“You sure you’re up for it? Do you want to rest? I can bring dinner in here for you a-” “The dragon is hungry,” Lloyd announced firmly. He stood decisively and tried to subtly crumple the letter in his desk drawer.

She stood too. “What dragon?” “Me. I’m the dragon!” Nya snort-laughed and Lloyd grinned for real, his tiny fangs flashing white. “Well, lead on, squirt.” She gestured to the door and he proudly stomped to the doorway.

Where he paused uncertainly.

And looked back at the drawer.

She touched his shoulder gently, trying to pull him away. “It’s not going to follow you,” she reminded him. “I promise.”

The voices in his mind tried to protect. He told them to shut up. “So, Kai’s cooking?” he asked, once again pasting on the smile.

She frowned, wanting to say something, but his pleading green eyes made her change the subject anyway. “Yeah, and he’s trying this new recipe…”

Their voices faded as they left the room, chattering about who could handle the spice levels of Kai’s creation.

Golden light spilled across the room, tracing patterns on the furniture and the floor. In the drawer, the crumpled letter started inevitably collecting dust alongside a forgotten math test. Black, lead letters sprawled across the page.

Dear me.

I Love You, I Trust You

SEXY

GIRL

Will You Be My Yang?

KAI

NYA

Chores Schedule

COLE

Kai, do the laundry

Nu-uh, I did it last week

z z z

Built to Protect

Wise Sea Monster

"In It To Win It"

SilentWhispOfHope

Peering into the kaitenzushi restaurant, a traveler would be met with traditional decor with a modern twist. Friends and couples huddled around small booths, feasting on the sushi. Small computers were set at the far end of each table ready for orders with small televisions above them, each filled with potentially prizes each table could win after eating. Two rows of conveyor belts circled around the booths. One constantly being filled with common preferences while the other flew custom orders at the speed of an elemental dragon. In the far corner of the restaurant, a loud ruckus could be heard. Squeezed together, a group of teenages sat together. Each wore a signature color. To the outside viewer, they appeared as normal, chaotic kids. However, to those who knew them, they were really a chaotic team of vigilanties. This didn't mean they had their own fair share of civilian normalcy though.

"Hey!" Exclaimed Jay, a brunet covered in blue, as Cole pushed past him to grab an oncoming nigiri. The black-haired boy quickly stuck out his tongue in response.

"You snooze, you lose," he replied, a smirk on his face.

"But I wanted that piece!"

A girl dressed in a red, delicately embroidered dress put her hand on Jay.

"Don't get too upset about that. We can always order one if you really want one that bad," she pointed out.

"Thanks, Nya! You're the best girlfriend a guy can ask for!" Jay exclaimed as his face lit up with a smile. Quickly, the freckled boy placed a quick peck on her cheek.

A groan followed suit from the boy across from him. Kai attempted to slump further back into the booth chair, pulling his red hood up and pulling on the strings. He did not want to see his baby sister kissing one of his teammates. His cringe meter was going through the roof watching the two be lovey-dovey. Kai let out a puking sound. The blond decked in green left out a small chuckle.

"Come on, Kai. It's not like you wouldn't do the same thing with Skylor!" He exclaimed. His red eyes glimmered with mischief. Kai ripped his hoodie off in surprise.

"No, I wouldn't!" The brunet yelled.

The table lurched forward as he quickly stood up, rattling the dinnerware. The restaurant quieted instantly as other food-goers stared at him intently. Lloyd tried to hide his smile while Cole raised an eyebrow at him, sushi stuffed into his mouth. Kai silently looked around him and noticed the ruckus he had caused. Promptly, he sat back down, covering his face in embarrassment. The people in the restaurant slowly resumed their conversations. Kai rested his head against the table. Zane, an icy-haired blond, turned towards him.

"Your increased heart rate and blood flow to your face implies that you are lying," he robotically replied. Kai glanced towards the nindroid from under his arms. After a moment, Zane awkwardly lifted both of his arms and gave his teammate two thumbs up.

"Ok, sure thing, Elsa."

"I still do not understand this reference."

Jay grabbed the tablet in the center of the table, clicking through different tabs to find the sushi he wanted. His blue eyes almost sparkled once he saw it. In the center of the screen stood a beautiful piece of futomaki: perfectly cut vegetables and mushrooms hugged by the fluffiest rice one could imagine before being delicately rolled into shape with seaweed. Jay almost drooled at the image. Nya looked over her boyfriend's shoulder, clicking on the order button before the blue ninja could enter a food hypnosis. She briefly ruffled his hair with a smile before returning the tablet back to the center of the table. Seconds later, the secondary food track began to whirr to life. Jay eagerly peered down the track. A vibrant blur of color flew at him and abruptly stopped centimeters from his face. He could see the air around the sushi vibrate with sparkles.

"If you don't grab that soon, I'm taking it from the conveyor belt," Cole mumbled, mouth full of food. Jay snapped out his dream-like phase.

"No!" The brunet exclaimed as he lurched towards the sushi.

Ripping the plate from the conveyor belt, Jay attempted to block Cole from being near his exquisite futomaki. Jokingly, the earth ninja slowly reached across the table with his chopsticks. Jay hissed in response and lifted his plate in the air. In the process of doing so, Nya was squished further into the back of the booth.

"Hey!" The water ninja huffed in annoyance.

Jay apologetically gave his girlfriend a sheepish smile. "Sorry!"

Very quickly, he shoved the sushi into his mouth.

"No need to be an Oni," Cole joked before turning towards Lloyd. "No offense."

"None taken," Lloyd laughed, red eyes glinting mischievously.

Zane frowned. "There is not enough evidence to suggest that all Oni hiss when upset. Not to mention that Lloyd is only half-demon, which is even a rarer case."

The team stared at the icy blond.

“I know it was a joke, but I am merely stating that it is an unbacked stereotype, and we shouldn’t be giving Oni the characteristics of a cat.”

The green ninja sympathetically smiled at the snow user. “I appreciate the effort though. Anyways, you guys know what time it is.”

“The best part!” Jay exclaimed, voice muffled.

“Dude! Chew with your mouth closed!” Kai presed. He quickly chucked a napkin at him.

The ninja team quickly stacked their empty plates into the center of the table. Zane collected the trash they had all collected during their meal and neatly set them aside at the end of the table. The nindroid noted to himself how the older generation did the opposite. He huffed in annoyance. The group of friends glanced upwards towards the small television above their booth. On it, a neon green, cartoon ninja sat near a kindling fire. Large snoring bubbles floated above its head. There was no doubt it was supposed to be the Green Ninja. On the opposite side of the screen, a large bubbled 5 stood proudly. Lloyd turned towards Cole.

“Do it.”

Almost immediately, the black head began inserting their plates into a small slot near the edge of their table and conveyor belt. With each plate, the number on the screen counted down. Once it hit zero, the cartoon ninja jumped to life. They jumped into the air and a green tornado enveloped them. As they spun across the screen, performing spinjitzu, green light threaded through the vortex. Everyone watched intently. Finally, they stopped in the center of the screen.

“Come on, come on!” Kai muttered to himself.

Jay swallowed his sushi in anticipation. The green ninja held its cupped hands to the screen. Sparkles flew out before filling up the entirety of the screen. Like a cheesy bowling alley screen, several words flew out: $10 OFF A MEAL! The sparkles disappeared, leaving the green ninja sitting by a simmering fire.

“Aw man!” Cole cried out. “I was hoping for one of those cool action figures they have out front.”

Zane paused for a moment. “According to my calculations, this allows us to be in budget for our outing as someone ate too much.”

Cole let out an offended gasp. “Hey, I’m a growing boy!”

“You say that every time!” Lloyd laughed.

“It is very important for us to stay within budget. Must I remind you all the last time we over-spent?” Zane stated.

Jay let out a whimper as Nya patted his shoulder in sympathy. “I still can feel the burning in my thighs from Wu’s training.”

“Well, we still have several plates left for one more try,” Lloyd announced.

“Oo! Oo! Let me do it this time,” Jay exclaimed.

Jay eagerly pushed the rest of the plates into the slot. Glancing back up to the small screen, pirate characters appeared from the corners. They crept up slowly behind the green ninja. As they neared, the green ninja jumped to life, surprising the crew of evil. The team leaned into the table with anticipation. The fighter quickly disarmed the group before they could even lift a finger. The character kicked up one of the pirate’s clubs into the air. Expertly, they jump-kicked the weapon into the screen, creating a shattering effect. Words took the position of the club as it fell. The lettering couldn’t be made out. Suddenly, the shattered glass twinkled down. The air felt heavy around those at the table. With each piece, the words became clear. CONGRATULATIONS! YOU HAVE WON A SMALL PRIZE, it read.

The team let out a small cheer. A large whirring sound interrupted them. Jay eagerly peered down the conveyor belt as the team’s prize arrived. When it became still, a lime green gacha ball stood still on a plate. The lightning ninja quickly grabbed the item and set it down in the center of the table. They all stared at it for a moment.

“What do you think it is?” Kai asked.

“I’m not sure, but looking at it isn’t going to do anything,” Lloyd responded.

The blond promptly grabbed the gacha ball and opened it. He frowned for a moment.

“What is it?” Nya questioned.

Lloyd picked up the small plastic bag from inside and tore the toy out from it. “It’s a sticky hand…”

“Seriously?”

“Yep.”

Suddenly, an idea came to the demigod. A smirk crept onto his face. Kai felt his heart drop.

He yelled. “Don’t even think about it!”

Lloyd jumped up from his seat, aiming for the brunet.

“Lloyd, no!”

"*Hold the World*"

Cia

It's Jay who notices first, his eyes well-practiced to picking up flaws in a design.

"Hey," he frowns at the passing monk, as he brings their group to a full halt in the re-built courtyard. "Where's Cole's mural? Y'know, the one for the Day of the Departed fight?"

The actual words he uses are less…gentle…than that, but the point comes across.

The monk blinks at them, five faces of consternation and one face wishing the ground would swallow him whole instead, and shrugs. "It was not deemed essential to the history the wall tells," he replies.

This is such a wrong answer that Cole can't even find it in himself to be hurt. He's too preoccupied helping Zane hold back a sputtering Jay to come up with a reply, anyways, and it's not as if he could outdo Nya's colorful use of language if he tried.

"–the nerve of that guy, is he serious?" she fumes, as Lloyd finally convinces a smoldering Kai that patience is the key to proper revenge, or something else concerning that Cole should probably check in on later. "Don't listen to him, Cole, he's just some washed-up old jerk."

"It's not a big deal, guys," Cole assures them. "Seriously. Let it go."

"Let it go–"

Cole tunes Kai out, musing to himself. He's almost honest, when he says it's not a big deal. It stings, a little, that he's been excluded from their story. It grates a bit more that he's been deemed *unessential*, but Cole knows a bunch of paintings on the wall don't decide the truth. He's got his teammates pressed around him, angered enough on his behalf that they're ready to fight a bunch of old monks, and that's all the reassurance Cole needs. Their opinion will always matter more than anyone else's.

His team, unfortunately, doesn't seem to agree.

"Maybe we can get them to add another?" Lloyd's measuring the span of the wall with his hands, flinching briefly as they pass over Morro's visage. "Or we could just, um, replace a few entirely."

"We're not asking them to do anything," Kai glares. "They're going to add yours, like it or not."

The others stare at him, their eyes narrowed. Cole sweats under the gazes. "What."

"You're right," Jay finally nods, and Cole begins to relax. "We can't trust 'em to do it," he continues, eyes fierce. "So we'll just have to do it ourselves."

Cole blinks. *Wait.* "That's not what I–"

To his dismay, he's promptly steamrolled by the rest of his team's sudden rush of enthusiasm. Which isn't unusual, exactly – their team is a force to be reckoned with, at both their best and worst when they believe one of their own's been wronged. Normally Cole doesn't mind this, but still. The monks didn't mean any harm.

"They hurt your feelings, intent doesn't matter," Jay grumbles, as Kai cracks his knuckles once again. Cole opens his mouth to protest that they didn't *hurt his feelings*, he's not a child, but Lloyd's already talking.

"Mural first, revenge second," he reminds them. "If we make one right then we get a freebee on the wrong."

"That isn't how it works," Zane frowns, but he doesn't disagree, either. Cole's been thoroughly abandoned.

"First things first," Jay says, tapping a pencil to his chin. "What do we wanna paint? I like the idea of Cole punching Yang in the face."

"With his scythe," Nya adds. "Wait, was it a scythe or a sword?"

"It was his lava arms," Kai says. "Right? 'Cause you were all lit up, it was sick–"

"I made peace with him!" Cole protests.

"After wiping the floor with him," Jay says pointedly.

"From an artistic standpoint, we could silhouette the fight with the eclipse," Zane offers. Lloyd opens his mouth to agree, but he must catch the look on Cole's face first, because his expression quickly changes. "It's Cole's mural, guys. What do you think, Cole?"

Cole pauses, staring at the half-formed sketches they've scrawled on scratch paper. He thinks of how Jay and Nya swing wide when they walk past the portrait of Nadakhan, their eyes averted. He thinks of how Lloyd flinches when he passes the portrait of his father, braces himself, then flinches again when he passes Morro, then braces himself again, and flinches again when he passes Harumi.

It's not really a question anyone's had to ask themselves, why Lloyd prefers to cross the courtyard on the other side.

Cole worries his lip. He doesn't like remembering the moments of panic, the cold fear that his team had forgotten him entirely. Defeating Yang isn't the part of the night he likes to remember, either. When he thinks back to the Day of the Departed, there's a single, bright moment that stands out, one that he safeguards closely for the bad days.

"What if…what if we didn't paint the fight," he begins, hesitantly.

Jay blinks. "What? But what about punching Yang in the face?"

"Well, yeah, that'd be cool, but uh…" Cole trails off, glancing around before finding Lloyd's eyes. "I liked the end of the night better. The part where, uh, I came back to you guys."

Lloyd's expression lightens in understanding. "The big group hug part?"

"Yeah," Cole nods.

"The big group hug part," Jay repeats, blankly. "Instead of an epic portrait of you wiping the floor with Yang, you want us all…hugging."

"Yes."

Kai frowns. "But that's sappy."

"Coming from the king of sappy speeches here," Nya elbows him.

Kai scowls, but he knows better than to argue. It is Cole's painting, after all, and the more he thinks about it, the more he *doesn't* want the terrifying moments his team had forgotten about him immortalized for them to walk past every morning, so there's really no arguing after that.

Cole can be as stubborn as any of the others, when he wants to be. Not that he needs to, because Jay and Kai crack the minute Cole meets their eyes.

"Fine," Kai sighs. "Let's go throw our sappy team hug in everyone's faces then, I guess."

It's easier than Cole though it would be, especially considering the fuss the monks had put up all the weeks they'd worked on the other murals. Kai begins sanding the wall with practiced hands, carving out a spot for their mural with careful eyes. Jay marks his progress, muttering about the dimensions while Zane and Nya sneak off to acquire paint. They've decided to do the actual painting in the night, when they won't be caught, which only leaves Cole and Lloyd with the mock-up sketch.

It's a bit sloppy, with their differing styles, but the figures that come to life on the page are drawn with far more care than they'd be otherwise. The others filter in as it grows late, passing their own judgement on the sketch. Kai pauses over Lloyd's shoulder, frowning.

Lloyd glances up at him, then back at the sketch in concern. "What's wrong?" he says, scrubbing the outline of a hand he'd been drawing with the eraser. "Is something off?"

"No, but – well, kind of. You've made us all taller," Kai gestures at the figures. "I mean, sure, you're short, but give yourself some credit."

Cole glances at the sketch himself. Apart from the slight spark of jealousy at how Lloyd's somehow managed to sketch Kai's hair when Cole's been struggling, the first thing he notices is how much taller they all look, compared to Lloyd's own little caricature. Lloyd's sketched even Jay with an extra few inches of height, and Cole knows he's gaining on him rapidly.

"Oh," Lloyd blinks. He glances back at his sketch, and the tips of his ears flush red. "I, um, I guess that's just how I still see you guys. Ah, sorry."

There's a pause of silence after that, and Cole feels a suspicious kind of lump form in his throat. It's one thing for them to see Lloyd as the baby of the family, since that's common knowledge and unavoidable no matter how Lloyd protests by this point. It's *less* common for Lloyd to admit he still sees them all as his big siblings.

Suddenly awkward, Lloyd ducks his head. "I can change it," he offers.

"No," Kai glares them all down, as if he expects them to argue, for some reason. "No, it's fine." His eyes soften, and he ruffles Lloyd's hair. "Give yourself another inch or two though, okay? You're a pretty big part of this."

Lloyd rolls his eyes, but he returns to sketching with a small, happy smile.

Cole's lips pull with a smile of his own, but it fades as he returns to his own half of the sketch. He's been filling in the details after Lloyd, helping with the background, but it's the faces that give him pause. His fingers still over Jay's figure, hesitant, and he worries his lip between his teeth. He's drawn his team before, more than they'll ever know, but getting their faces right is something that's always been difficult.

Not for lack of knowing – Cole doesn't need to look at Jay to know how many freckles he's got dotting the right side of his cheek. He doesn't need a photo to remember the way Kai's eyes crinkle at the corners when laughs, or the one dimple in Lloyd's right cheek when he smiles. The way Zane's eyes brighten when he's happy is as firmly rooted in his memory as the way Nya's nose scrunches when she's trying to hold back laughter.

Cole knows his family better than the back of his hand, and he loves them more than he'll ever be able to put on any old monastery wall with cheap paint. The knowledge that they're going the extra mile just so Cole has his own spot, just so Cole knows he isn't forgotten, is doing things to his heart that are going to spell trouble if the paper wants to stay dry. It's also adding an *unreasonable* amount of pressure as he tries to get the curve of Jay's eyes right.

"Just give him a little cartoon face," Lloyd suggests, as he pencils in exaggerated, spiky eyebrows on Kai's face. "Jay'll get a kick out of that."

"Like Kai's gonna get a kick out of looking like an angry puppy?" Cole retorts.

Lloyd grumbles under his breath, scrubbing at Kai's face with an eraser. "I didn't go to school, leave me alone."

Cole snorts, but he leans back, tapping his pencil against the edge of the table. He doesn't exactly have room to talk, as far as schools go. Just because his school had "art" in the name doesn't mean *performing* arts are going to help him draw his teammates' faces any better.

“I say we just break out the spray-paint and be done with it,” Nya yawns, as she starts on her third cup of coffee for the day, slipping extra creamer into Cole’s cup before handing him one as well. “We’re color-coded already, may as well take advantage of the fact.”

Cole, already halfway into his coffee and trying to pretend he’s not melting over the reminder that Nya’s memorized exactly how he likes it, pauses.

“Huh,” he murmurs, scratching through his botched sketch. “That’s an idea, actually.”

The proper term for it, as it turns out, is *disaster,* but even with paint thickening in their hair and vivid splashes of color dotting their clothes, it’s by far the happiest Cole’s seen them all in months. Kai claims to be grumpy, especially after Nya dumps cyan paint over his hair, but the wide grin he sports as he splashes paint down the back of Lloyd’s shirt betrays him.

Even Zane’s letting go, retaliating for the orange Cole splashes him with by snatching Jay’s bright blue and splattering it over his face. It’s messy and undignified and they probably wake up half the monks in the process, but for a couple hours they feel like kids, wild and laughing and careless, and that’s worth more to Cole than any mural on the wall could ever be.

They wind down eventually, adrenaline fading for a peaceful kind of exhaustion, and they step back to survey their work.

“Well, it’s not gonna win any awards, but I think it captures us,” Jay declares.

“You’re just saying that ‘cause there’s so much blue,” Lloyd huffs, but he’s smiling as he studies the mural.

Compared to the others that dot the wall, their painting is an explosion of colors – blues and reds blending into purples, greens bleeding into whites that splash against bright maroons, all silhouetted in rich oranges and dark, sweeping blacks. The vivid contrast of colors is almost blinding, set against the other murals, but Cole’s eyes are stinging for an entirely different reason.

They’re all in the mural, but they’ve painted him front and foremost, undeniably the center of the portrait. They’ve used his signature black, but it’s the vibrant, sunset oranges they’ve lined it with that give him pause.

He’s the only one with clear features, every line painted with delicate, careful precision, and Cole doesn’t need to look at their faces to know the love that went into the brushstrokes.

“We look like a bunch of sappy kids,” Kai remarks.

“Well, buddy,” Jay says, slinging an arm over his shoulder. “I’ve got some news to break to you, then.”

“I think it looks great,” Lloyd says, flicking red paint from his shoulder. “But what’s most important is that Cole likes it.”

Cole swallows, then shakes his head. “I love it,” he manages. “It’s great, guys. It’s – thank you.”

The crack in his voice is obvious, and he finds himself rapidly smothered by the others for it, but crammed into the center of the group hug, the tight warmth inescapable, Cole’s never felt further from the cold sting of being forgotten.

NINJAGO

“*A Fish Out on the Ice*”

stronk-anime-nya

The ice felt like bitter poison as Akita pressed her palm against it, staring at the frozen figure of one of the formling villagers. The cold had already dried her tears by now, the liquid now just crystals of ice.

Everything seemed to have happened so quickly. It felt like just a moment ago Akita was celebrating with her brother, but now she stands in the center of her home, alone. The wind continued to howl against her face, as if it was mocking her loss.

Akita continued to trace her hands against the tiny crevices in the ice. Its glow against the night’s light was... beautiful in a strange, messed-up way. She had the urge to sit right there for hours, keeping the frozen statues company. She didn’t want to leave them alone, to fend for themselves against the harsh winter that grew more intense by the minute.

Images of Kataru continued to harass her mind, reminding Akita of her failure to protect him. He was gone because she was too slow. Maybe if she hadn’t run off for one last lap she wouldn’t be in this situation right now. Maybe it was best if she didn’t stay. Picking up her knife she had dropped on the ground, Akita transformed into a wolf and walked out of her home.

The days soon blurred into an incomprehensible mess, as the differences between night and day meant little to Akita. All she could do was keep moving and hope she could figure out what to do next. As the snow continued to blow around her, Akita felt her senses slowly become more numb. Despite how painful it could be at times, she told herself it was a good thing, because the emptiness allowed her to forget everything she had left behind.

Food was originally rather difficult to come from, as Akita had little experience with hunting. Eventually though, she got the hang of it, her accuracy growing more precise. Over time, Akita started to learn more about the self-proclaimed “Ice Emperor”, and how the formlings weren’t the only village he terrorized. It made her blood boil.

As expected, spending your days alone in a frozen wasteland gave you a lot of time to reflect, whether that’s a good or bad thing. With each hour, a primal instinct began to emerge inside of Akita. All the rage and hurt that bubbled within her started to reach its boiling point. She wanted to take all her anger out on something… someone.

Snow continued to fall during both day and night as the climate grew more cold and unforgiving. As time went on, the stories of the Ice Emperor became more common. In less than a year Akita counted maybe hundreds of tales of how families were separated, frozen… or even worse. Despite how their loss mirrored her own, she was able to soon push what had happened all that time ago to the back of her mind. An afterthought. Just a bitter memory.

The emptiness that resided in only a small part of Akita’s heart continued to grow as she soon forgotten the sound of her own voice. The only thing that echoed in her mind as she trekked across empty glaciers were the feral growls she would emit whenever she came across a creature that was just as desperate to survive as herself.

Flakes of snow flew in several different directions, as Akita tried to persevere through the storm that obscured her vision. The sun was only moments away from falling below the horizon, signaling the need for shelter. Snow always did seem to fall more violently in the moonlight. In the distance, Akita spotted a small ripple in the otherwise flat glacier. Running towards it, she realized it was a small pocket of shelter made from built-up snow and ice from previous storms. Crawling inside of it, Akita reversed back into her human form as she felt herself relax for the first time in days. Opening the small bag she had picked up from a village, she began to chew on cold fish as she watched the blizzard sway and howl violently.

Only a few nibbles in, Akita noticed a strange silhouette in the distance. On the other side of the glacier to be specific. Akita watched in silence, hoping the figure that was curled up on the ice would eventually stand up and head to safety. Ten minutes in and nothing changed. During that time, however, she realized that the shadow was in fact alive, as its chest would rise and fall.

The storm was growing stronger exponentially, and the figure made no attempt to try and find warmth. Taking a deep breath, Akita stood up and she stuck her food back into her bag and began to try and navigate through the blizzard.

It seemed the wind was trying its hardest to prevent Akita from reaching her goal, as it seemed to blow even more as the ice continued to try and slip her. As she got closer, she realized that the injured silhouette was a wolf as well, although they were most likely not a formling. Picking them up, Akita made the journey back to her shelter.

After what felt like forever, Akita gently placed the wolf on the ground as she relaxed against the ice. The animal continued to stir as Akita took off her cape and placed it on top of them. The feeling of hunger had long since passed as she watched over the wolf.

When the blizzard finally came to an end, the night concluded as the sun’s rays poked through the icy roof. The wolf stirred to consciousness, as if the light gave them life. Akita smiled as she retrieved her cape. Standing up, she met eyes with the wolf, before grabbing her bag and placing it in front of them.

“It has all the food you’ll need. It’s yours now. Take it,” she instructed.

The animal seemed confused by the gesture, before eventually grabbing the bag with their teeth. With one last look, Akita left the shelter and continued her journey.

A few days after the second anniversary of the loss of her village, Akita trekked through one of the realm’s many forests. With the snow so deep it left some of the biggest paw prints she’d ever seen, Akita felt exhausted after only walking for a mere hour. As the moon hung over the sky, she began to search for a place to rest for the night.

Loud noises echoed throughout what was a mostly quiet forest. Curious, Akita ran over to see what was going on. Pushing past the bushes, she came across a person in green staring down a small pack of feral wolves. Realizing they were about to pounce, Akita disregarded her own safety as she charged at one of them, knocking them off balance. As the wolf laid sprawled

on the ground, Akita ran to another wolf, letting out a growl. Almost instantly, the rest of the wolves retreated.

"Wow, I've never seen a wolf like you before."

Akita quickly turned around, letting out a muffled, instinctual growl as she was reminded of his presence.

"What do you want?" He quickly asked, slightly leaning back as he pointed his sword at Akita.

Her aggressiveness began to fade away as the man continued. He seemed different than the other villagers she came across, more vibrant. The last time she'd come across someone like that was with… her brother.

"I bet you're hungry. Well, don't even think about it, because I fight back!" The man grinned.

Akita's stance shrunk as she barked in response to him waving his sword. Much more vibrant, she confirmed. Taking note of this, his posture relaxed as he drew back his sword, exchanging it for a fish on a stick. As he threw it on the ground in front of her, Akita sprung back a little, before examining the offering.

"You can eat that, okay? Truce?" He said, the smile still not leaving his face as he walked away.

She was disappointed to see him leave, despite her not knowing why. For the first time in years, Akita felt comfort. So against her own urge to travel the other direction and rest, Akita finished the stranger's fish and began to follow him into the pass known to many as Wojira's Wrath.

"*Crown of Ice*"

LSWritings

It was always cold, though I would not know. My body had grown numb decades ago. I was accustomed to the ice. It was all I have ever known. My breath visible. Breaking my body free of my thrown repeatedly. My hand permanently bound to my staff. My subjects constantly shivering. This was my life. It always had been. And it always would be. This is what my life was set to be for all eternity.

At least, that is what I assumed.

Until the day my advisor, Vex, brought to my attention something quite bizarre. A group of strangers who appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. They stood out in their color-coded clothing. They were weak to the cold. I was certain they would freeze to death, or be mauled by the wolves who inhabit the woods. However, they were saved by the village. Those fools continued to defy me, thus I sent my samurai to punish them accordingly.

It was here, the other worldly strangers showed what they're capable of. It was rather impressive. They held their own and protected the village with ease. I could use their powers in my ranks. And it seemed my path would soon cross with theirs. Soon, I learned one of them was coming to my fortress.

A boy dressed in green. Despite how young he was, he held himself like a leader. Determined, strong, skilled, stubborn. I could use this boy on my side. He soon approached, wielding a weapon in the shape of a giant man of white, green, and gold. I sent my ice dragon to challenge the metal giant. I watched from afar in amazement at the boy's skill. Yet despite his strength, my own beast was able to bring him down. He was captured and Vex brought the child before me. He was roughly thrown to the floor, waking up after the shock of his battle knocked him unconscious.

I struggled against the ice that held me to the throne. Something I had grown accustomed to after so many years. Once the ice was shattered, I descended down to meet the young warrior. I wanted to see such a skilled fighter up close. His youthful eyes met my own. He seemed to scan me over for a moment. A frosty gasp escaped his lips.

"Zane?" He slowly got back on his feet. "I — I don't understand. How is this possible?"

That name? He had addressed me in a way I had never known. The foreign name left me rather confused. I am the Ice Emperor. Yet this foolish boy seemed to fail in understanding this. "What did you call me?"

"Zane! Your name is Zane!" He insisted. "Don't you remember?"

He looked at me much like a broken child as he attempted to approach closer. My guards stopped him, crossing their spears in the way of his path, making him jump back slightly.

"Step back." Vex ordered. "You are addressing the Ice Emperor."

The green clad warrior shook his head in irritation. "I came here for you Zane. I came here to bring you home."

How strange…

I had never seen this boy before. Yet, he spoke as though we were close. As if we shared a history and more. It was utter nonsense. The cold must have broken the child's mind. How pitiful. For decades I dwelled within the ice. The cold of the empire was all I knew.

"This… is my home." I gesture around.

"No." The boy insisted. "Ninjago is your home!"

He daringly shoved against the blades keeping him back, staring at me with great stubbornness. This boy expected me to believe his words? How could I? This place he spoke of, I had never even heard of it before. What had he called it?

"Ninjago?" I repeated slowly.

The boy continued to push against the guards. "Think Zane. Try to remember! We were all together! We were fighting Aspheera and… and… she banished you with her staff."

Aspheera? Ninjago? Zane? I could not help but wonder if these were all merely pieces of fiction meant to deceive me. My mind began to wonder and question, until Vex's voice caught my attention.

"Don't listen to him. He lies."

As I suspected.

"It's the truth!" The boy barked on. "Zane, you have to remember something. Or… someone. Master Wu. Or Pixal. Or… or… Kai?"

More names thrown at me so relentlessly. It was growing exhausting. None of these names mattered to me. However, try as I may, I could not repress the curiosity building inside.

"Who?"

"Kai! Remember when I threw his reds in with your whites and all your clothes turned pink? And you had to dress up as the pink ninja? Remember?"

As he rambled on, a smile came over his face. Perhaps in remembering what seemed to be a fond memory for him? Or perhaps, in hopes of the little story awakening something in me. A small part of me almost wished these stories were mine to share with him and his other color-coded allies. I searched through my mind for any memory similar to the description provided. I tried to remember such as story. But…

"No."

"He seeks to deceive you. To confuse you. Let me deal with him, my lord." Vex bowed to me as the boy glared daggers at him.

I wondered if that glare came from anger. That his tricks were indeed failing to work on me. Or was there truly something I had forgotten long ago? I doubted this to be so. I stared the child down, daring him to challenge me. His glare melted into a face of defeat. His eyes found my staff, looking it up and down. Perhaps my grip tightened around it? But I could not be sure, for my hand had grown numb long ago.

"You were holding the scroll of Forbidden Spinjitzu when it happened! It… it must have corrupted you somehow. How long have you been here Zane? How long have you been holding that?" He pointed to my staff.

Once again, he called me Zane. It seemed he lacked to understand who I was. A punishment may be required. But not yet. I found myself intrigued to see where this little game of his ended.

I looked to my staff, thinking of memories and time I knew to be true. "Many… decades."

"Decades? Time must be different here…" He looked unsure, perhaps even worried. "I don't understand how, but… Zane, the scroll has corrupted you. Corrupted your power. You have to put it down!"

Again, he pushed against the guards blocking his way. The way he spoke. The knowing look glimmering in his eyes. I was sure. He knew of the staff's power. It was concerning. It seemed impossible. But that look in his eyes… somehow, he had seen it before. This left me asking many questions. I grew tired of this.

"He seeks the scepter!" Vex accused.

"Don't listen to him Zane!" The boy continued on. "This isn't you! You're a good person! You're my friend! You have to trust me! Put it down!"

"See? He desires it for himself! Seize him!" Vex ordered.

The guards strode up to the child, blades ready to strike, forcing him backward. He carried no weapons. However, I was certain he needed none to put up a fight. After all, he had made it this far in these unforgiving lands.

The guards charged, swinging to kill.

"No!" The boy skillfully dodged their attacks.

As my soldiers continued their assault, he held his own. He dodged and struck with great precision. His master, Wu I believe he called him, must have trained him well and for many years. Despite his youthful age, he fought with the skills of a true warrior. The cold did not seem to slow down anymore, his lungs likely learning to adapt.

He quickly made his way for me, for my staff. Once close, I struck him with my ice. With a gasp of pain and shock he recoiled to the ground. His movements ceased. Yes, against my armies he was strong. But against me, he was weak. The guards approached to restrain him before he awoke again.

"Behold his treachery." Vex spoke. "One moment he speaks of friendship, and the next he tries to steal your scepter. Allow me to destroy him, my lord!"

I looked down at the boy again. I thought back to his energetic eyes. A face so young, but with eyes so wise. Wise beyond his years. I wondered what this child had gone through. Had I truly once been a piece of his life? Had I once been his friend? His actions here were more than worry of death. But my need for answers outweighed any logic I had.

"Lock him in the dungeon." I commanded.

Vex seemed wary of this choice. "But my lord —"

"You heard me." I struck my staff against the frozen ground, daring him to question my choice.

After a moment, Vex turned back to the soldiers. "You heard the emperor. To the dungeon with him!"

I watched as two of my men dragged the strange boy away and out of sight. Such a desperate child, it was almost pitiful. Such an attack on me was worth a far greater punishment.

I hesitated.

Why?

Those who oppose me must always be removed. That is how I have stayed in power for so many decades. However, I could not bring myself to end this boy's life. Against my better judgement, against my advisor's words, against the boy's very actions. Perhaps I am a fool. Despite the logic of the situation screaming in my ears, there was something even louder holding my attention.

The boy's eyes.

The way he looked at me. Like an old friend. Dare I say… like family. It seemed far too genuine to be a mere act to gain my power. But I do not know this boy. Nothing he said rang true to my memories. Everything I know is clashing, shattering against each other like the most fragile pieces of ice. There is no simple solution to this problem. I must think before I decide his fate.

For now, he will remain in a cell where he can cause no trouble. Or rather, no more trouble than he has already. And he has caused me trouble, for my mind continues to dwell on his words. I should know better. Know better than to let the ramblings of a child get to me. Yet here I was, pondering, confused by all he had said. Curiosity forming within my mind, cracking and threatening to shatter all I know.

Zane.

That name. I do not know it, yet it provides a welcoming warmth I have never felt before. A reassuring weight of safety I do not understand. There is a longing I feel toward that name. The boy claimed that name to be mine, and I found myself nearly wishing for it to be true. For curiosity? For friendship? For family? Most likely for all of it.

Zane.

Zane.

Zane.

Who is he?

Who am I?

I sunk back down onto the throne, the staff and ice suddenly much more heavy. The frost much more cold and bitter. The crystals forming around me much faster than before, ensuring I stay in place. My breath slow and visible as I stare out at nothing. I close my eyes and all I can see is green, shimmering with desperation. With pain and great vulnerability. Reaching out for me as if I were an old friend. I am tempted to reach out in response, but the ice holds me to the throne. And so, I stay. Yet my place now feels much more of burden than ever before.

Master Wu

Kai.

Pixal.

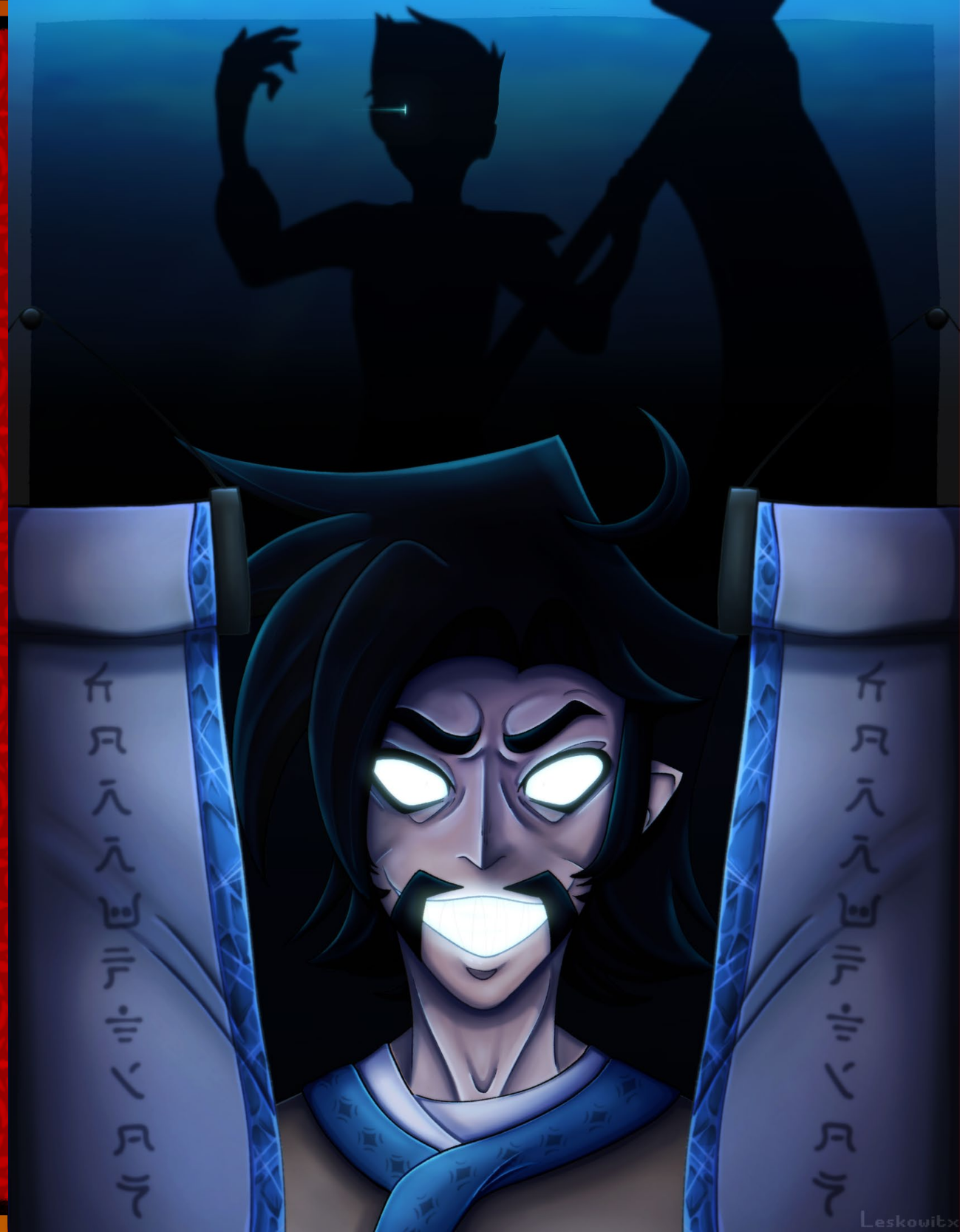
Ninjago.

Zane.

The Ice Emperor.

I lean back with a great sigh, suddenly exhausted. I have much to think about.

My crown of ice begins to burn.



"*Students, Enemies, Friends*"

Moxie

Aspheera didn't know what to expect once she was free from prison. Now that his students were all safely back in Ninjago, Wu had pulled some strings to free her, in the hopes they could repair their friendship.

She refused to give the idea any consideration. "Our friendship ended centuries ago," she hissed. "You are a fool, Wu, and I want nothing to do with you!"

Wu didn't flinch. "Then I won't force you," he said. "However, I must ask something of you."

"Absolutely not."

"Please, Aspheera, hear me out."

Aspheera crossed her arms and glared at him. "Fine. You may speak."

Wu nodded. "You are not the only person I've hurt," he said. "There is… a former student of mine. He has been staying with me, but the reminders of the past will not allow him to heal. If you could watch over him, I would be very grateful."

"You are asking an awful lot of me, Wu." Aspheera snorted. "I haven't even met this student. Can you tell me anything about him?"

"He's tried to kill me more than once."

"I'll do it."

Wu set her up in a small, secluded hut, with the mountain Wu's monastery stood on visible in the distance. Aspheera decided to tolerate this and did her best to make herself at home. Her followers were no longer with her, now that she lost the element of fire, and the student she had yet to meet would be her only company.

There was a knock on her door. "Who is it?" she snapped, knowing full well who it was.

She was right. "I'm here," Wu said. "I brought Morro with me."

"What, already?" Aspheera ran her eyes over the empty rooms, furnished only with necessities. "Fine. Bring him in."

Wu stepped aside, and a ghost entered the room, staring down at his bare feet. He wore a tattered shawl and carried a small bag over one shoulder. Wu tried to put a hand on his shoulder. The ghost shrugged it off and glared at him.

Aspheera laughed, catching the ghost's attention. He took a step back and clenched his fists. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"I told you, Morro," Wu said. "This is Aspheera. She was an old friend of mine."

"Ha!" Aspheera said. "I like the past tense."

Morro eyed her. "You didn't tell me she was a serpentine."

Aspheera hissed softly. "He didn't tell me you were a ghost."

Morro and Wu both flinched. Morro spoke first. "It's his fault," he said. "I died because of him."

"Well," Aspheera said, "you'll have to tell me all about it." To Wu, she said, "you can leave now."

Morro pulled away from him and walked past Aspheera, deeper into the house. "Do I get a room?" he said loudly.

Wu started to speak. "Of course you—"

"I said," Aspheera hissed, "you can leave now."

Wu paused for a moment, then nodded slowly. "Alright," he said. "Goodbye, Morro."

"I hope I never see you again," Morro said. "I'll take not having a room for that."

Wu gave him a sad smile before walking out and closing the door behind him. Aspheera showed Morro his room, which, apart from a simple bed and set of shelves, was bare.

"Do you eat at all?" she asked. "I could make something for the both of us."

"I don't need to eat," Morro said. "So you were Wu's friend?"

"Was, yes." Aspheera hummed. "He betrayed me and had me imprisoned for thousands of years, so we are no longer friends, no matter what the old fool thinks. I am only doing this because I couldn't stand the thought of a child living with him."

Morro bristled. "I'm not a child!"

"My mistake, then. The sentiment stands."

The ghost relaxed. "So what are we doing here?" he asked. "It doesn't look like much."

Aspheera shrugged. "I am going to make myself lunch," she said. "You can settle in, if you'd like. We're going to be each other's only company for the foreseeable future, so we'd best get to know one another."

"What's there to know? I was a starving, homeless orphan, Wu took me in, a lot of stuff happened, and now I'm dead."

Aspheera laughed. "Would you like me to go first, then? I'll talk as I cook, and then you can talk while I eat."

Morro rolled his eyes, but said, "Okay."

The two of them adapted to life with the other. Morro didn't need to sleep, so he would make noise late at night and wake Aspheera up. Sometimes she'd yell at him to keep it down, sometimes she'd come out and sit with him while he ranted about those who had wronged him. She had to be careful with water around him, but at least serpentine didn't need to wash often. Aspheera was content with a dust bath.

One day, there was a knock on the door. Aspheera and Morro froze mid-conversation. "That better not be Wu," Morro muttered.

Aspheera raised her voice. "You'd better not be Wu!"

"Nah," the person responded, "just have a message from him."

Morro's eyes widened, and he rushed to the door. Before Aspheera could ask what the hurry was, he slammed it open and shouted, "Boo!"

The scruffy man screamed bloody murder and fell backwards. Morro cackled. Aspheera decided she should step in and slithered over. "Morro, get away from that poor man, you're scaring him half to death."

"Should've brought my goddamn super soaker!" the man spit out, picking up his hat from where it had fallen and scrambling to his feet. "Why the hell are you here, y' little brat?"

Aspheera pushed Morro away with her tail and gave a toothy smile to the stranger. "My name is Aspheera," she said. "You seem to already know Morro; I agreed to take care of him, as a final favor to Wu. Who are you?"

The man pulled his hat over his head and glared at her through one eye, the other covered by an eyepatch. "Ronin," he said. "You're Aspheera, huh? Goddamn, I should never have agreed to this…"

"Agreed to what?"

Ronin turned around. "Come on up, Acronix."

Aspheera looked where he gestured. Behind him, a tall man stepped out of the bushes. He had a thick mane of black, fluffy hair, and he looked exceedingly nervous. Aspheera smiled. "Acronix, hm? What brings you here?"

"Acronix's another guy who's had bad history with Wu, if you can believe it," Ronin said. "Wu said to ask you if he could, like, sleep on your couch or something."

"I don't need much," Acronix said, "just a place to stay while I search for my brother."

Aspheera looked at Morro, who shrugged. "It's not like he can do anything to hurt us," he said. "You're like, a super powerful serpentine, and I'm already dead."

"I'll allow it," Aspheera said. "You will have to sleep on the couch, though. I'm afraid Morro and I have the only rooms."

Acronix brightened up. "Thank you," he said. "I promise, you won't even know I'm here."

"Cool," said Ronin. "I'm leaving."

Morro waved at him as he walked back to his copter. "Come back and visit!" he shouted. "Don't be a stranger!"

Ronin flipped him off and flew away.

True to his word, Acronix was barely in the house, leaving in the early mornings before Aspheera was awake, and not returning until late at night. He said very little about himself the few times they spoke; he was Acronix, searching for his brother, Krux. He was a former Master of Time, before their powers were taken from them. He had tried to kill Wu, and come very close to succeeding, but he felt no joy in it anymore. He didn't seem to feel joy in much anything, Aspheera thought to herself.

One day, he came back while Aspheera was still awake and Morro had locked himself in his room. "Good to see you," she said when he walked in. "Are you going straight to bed?"

Acronix sat down on the couch and stared at his hands. Aspheera quietly made an extra cup of tea and brought it to him. "Here," she said. "It'll help you sleep."

"I'm not going to find him," Acronix said.

"Your brother?" Aspheera sipped her own tea. "How do you know?"

"I don't think he ever got out of the time vortex." The mug trembled in his hands. "He told me he wouldn't be happy in this future, not like I could be. But how can I be happy without him? He waited forty years for me, and now he's gone. I'm never going to see him again."

Aspheera had never been any good at comforting people. "What did he want for you?" she asked.

"Oh, only the best." Acronix laughed, tears falling freely down his face. "He wanted us to have the power we deserved. He wanted us to be happy. He wanted me to be happy. I suppose I've failed him, in that regard."

"Now, I don't know him," Aspheera said, "but I don't think he would demand happiness from you, would he?"

"What?"

“He would know he has no control over your happiness. He wants it for you, but cannot demand it, not when there are so many factors at play. You haven’t failed him just because you’re not happy.”

Acronix turned his head away.

“But that doesn’t mean you can’t try to be happy.” Aspheera put down her cup. “What makes you happy, Acronix?”

He didn’t say anything for a long moment. Aspheera’s eyes were starting to droop. It was very late, after all.

Acronix finally spoke: “I liked the BorgPad.”

“Hm? What’s that?”

“Oh,” he said, “it’s a… technological device with all sorts of functions. There are games, there are pictures… I didn’t get to use it very much before we were lost in time, but it was really cool!” He was starting to brighten up, putting down his untouched tea and making animated gestures as he spoke. “They could even track temporal anomalies! No, that was the BorgWatch, actually… Dr. Borg really is amazing, I hope he’s alright, after what we did…”

Aspheera fell asleep midway through his rambling. When she woke up, Acronix had passed out on the couch. She draped a blanket over him and went to her own bed.

Acronix didn’t go out searching again the next day, choosing instead to spend it lying on the couch in tears. Aspheera brought him food and otherwise left him alone, while Morro followed suit.

The next day, there was a knock on the door, followed by Ronin’s voice: “I have a super soaker this time!”

“I bet he’s bluffing,” Morro said.

“Don’t push your luck,” Aspheera said, and she opened the door instead.

Ronin lowered the water gun and motioned to the bags of groceries. “Wu figured you’d need more food,” he said. “So here it is.”

“It’s appreciated,” Aspheera said. “Could you let Wu know we need a BorgPad, and that I hope he rots?”

“You need a what?” Ronin snorted. “Sure, I’ll let him know. Tell Morro I hate his guts, too.”

“I can hear you!” Morro shouted from inside the house. Ronin instantly raised the water gun again.

Aspheera narrowed her eyes. “Be careful where you point that thing, because if you return my friend to the Departed Realm, I’ll make sure you follow him.”

“Cool,” said Ronin. “I’m definitely not paid enough for this.”

He left. Aspheera brought the groceries inside and dropped them by Acronix. “Put these away,” she said when he raised his head off the couch. “If you’re going to stick around, you might as well make yourself useful.”

“Okay,” Acronix croaked.

Aspheera bared her teeth in what she hoped was a kind smile and went to cook lunch.

It wasn’t as if they were trapped in the hut. Aspheera took plenty of walks out in the forest; Morro preferred to stay inside, but Acronix would go with her, sometimes. Like Aspheera, he had only recently entered the modern world, and many things were new to him.

“Though it seems to me you like the change,” Aspheera commented on one of their walks.

Acronix laughed. “Technology is incredible,” he said. “Of course I’m amazed by it! But it’s still nice to get out into nature. Krux and I used to do this when we were children.”

A loud beep sounded, making them both pause. “Didn’t I ask you not to bring your BorgPad?” Aspheera said.

“I didn’t! That wasn’t me!”

Another beep, and another, fast and irregular. Aspheera crept towards the sound, Acronix following behind her. She could see movement up ahead, something dragging itself through the forest.

“Halt!” she called out. “Who are you?”

The beeping stopped. The figure crumpled to the ground. Aspheera moved forward. The figure wore a black ninja gi, but was clearly not Zane. A robot like Zane, though; Aspheera lifted them partway off the ground and their body dripped black fluid with a harsh scent.

Acronix gasped. “A nindroid!”

“Oh, you know what they are?” Aspheera said. “Good, you can help me fix them.”

“What? I don’t know how to fix nindroids!”

“You know technology better than I do. At least help me bring him back to the hut.”

The nindroid was heavy, but the two of them dragged the body back to the hut before the sun went down. With no way to contact anyone, and no knowledge of when Ronin would show up next, Acronix agreed to do what he could to fix them.

Morro regarded the unconscious nindroid with suspicion. “Why should we fix them?” he said. “For all we know, they’ll wake up and try to kill us. You, I mean.”

“Still,” Aspheera said, “do they not deserve a second chance? All of us got one.”

Morro snorted and phased back through his bedroom door.

It took a few hours of Acronix tinkering with the nindroid, all while their oil stained the floor, but eventually, he stood up and showed Aspheera a thick rectangle. “This is their brain,” he told her.

“So you’ve removed their brain?”

“I don’t have the skills to fix their body, but I think their brain is intact. We can wait for Ronin to come back with a computer and hook it up there. Then they’ll be able to talk to us.”

“Why can’t you hook it up to your BorgPad?”

“Because the BorgPad isn’t built for that.” Acronix carefully placed the nindroid’s brain on a shelf. “I don’t want to fry them or my BorgPad by messing around.”

Aspheera nodded. “Then we’ll wait until Ronin returns.”

Morro poked his head through his door. “Can I greet him this time?”

Ronin raised an eyebrow, looking down at the nindroid’s body. “Y’know,” he said, “this guy got pretty messed up, but I think I can fix him. For a price.”

“We have no money,” Aspheera said. “Just tell Wu to get us a computer and we’ll take it from there.”

“I dunno, I think you have something I want.”

Aspheera rolled her eyes. “Fine. What is it?”

Ronin hesitated for a long moment. “As much as I don’t trust him, I don’t think Morro’ll off me in the middle of the night,” he said. “Long story short, I got in some trouble and I need a place to stay.”

“Excuse me? We’re out of rooms. And couches.”

“Like the ghost brat needs one. He doesn’t sleep, right?”

Acronix snorted. “You can try to take it from him.”

“Seriously,” Ronin said, “I can camp outside or something, but no one else knows where this place is, or that a bunch of criminals are living here. It’s completely off the radar, which is super helpful for me. Hell, I’ll even get a real bed for Acronix, if you need one.”

Aspheera looked at the nindroid, her eyes flicking to their brain on the shelf. “Fine,” she said, “but you will not harm Morro, no matter how he teases you.”

Ronin sighed. “Yeah, yeah. Just don’t let him in my tent.”

Ronin pitched his tent and started work on the nindroid the next day. Morro, to his credit, didn’t go out to bother him while the work was being done, choosing instead to press his face against the window and make faces. Aspheera figured he did no harm.

Soon it was time to put the “brain”—the nindroid’s hard drive—back into their body. Ronin brought the nindroid into the house for the occasion. “Hopefully this works,” he said, examining the slot in the chest. “Sure, it looks fine, but it might have corrupted data or something.”

“Just do it already,” Morro said.

Ronin inserted the drive. The nindroid hummed to life. His visible eye lit up red and his hand shot out to grab Ronin’s neck.

“Hey!” Morro was at their side in an instant, prying the nindroid’s fingers off and dragging Ronin away. “Get away from him!”

The nindroid got to his feet and glared at them. “Who are you?!” he demanded in a deep, raspy voice. “What did you do to me?”

Aspheera put herself between the nindroid and her friends. “We fixed you,” she hissed. “The least you could do is offer some gratitude.”

“What’s your name?” Acronix asked. “Do you have one?”

The nindroid puffed up his chest. “I am General Cryptor,” he said, “built to serve the Overlord. Now that he’s gone, I serve no one, so you’d best stay out of my way.”

Aspheera flinched at the mention of the Overlord. Wu had told her many stories about that great evil. “Very well,” she said. “You may leave.”

Cryptor paused, regarding them one by one. A serpentine, a ghost, and two humans. “You won’t stop me?”

“No. We have no interest in keeping you here.” Aspheera motioned with her tail. “There’s the door. If you threaten harm, then leave us at once.”

Cryptor stood there for a moment longer, then nodded and marched to the door. Acronix quickly opened it for him and he disappeared into the night.

“Goddamn,” Ronin said, rubbing his throat. “Not so much as a thank you, huh? Alright, kid, let go of me.”

Morro took his hands off Ronin’s shoulders and stepped away. “I told you it was a bad idea,” he said. “Now what’re we gonna do?”

“Nothing,” Aspheera said. “One nindroid can’t do much damage, and if he does, the ninja can deal with him. I don’t particularly care enough to get involved.”

“Fixing him was pretty involved,” Acronix said.

Aspheera rolled her eyes. “I’m going to bed. That was enough drama for my day.”

She left the room without another word.

Two days later, there was a furious knocking on the door. Aspheera first looked out the window to make sure Ronin was still in his tent, then looked through the peephole. “Who are you?” she said to the red-haired woman standing outside.

“A friend,” she responded. “Can I come in?”

“Did Wu send you?”

“Hopefully he won’t even know I’m here.”

Aspheera opened the door. The woman walked in, looking around. “Huh,” she said, her eyes falling on the oil stain on the floor. “Have you been up to anything?”

“Nothing in particular,” Aspheera said.

Morro stuck his head through his door. “Who are you?” he demanded.

“Skylor,” she said with a smile. “Master of Amber, daughter of Master Chen. I used to be a bad guy too, if you can believe it.”

Ronin walked into the house behind her, tracking dirt on the floor. “Hey, Skylor,” he said casually. “What’re you doing here?”

She didn’t answer. “Is everyone here?” she asked. “I thought Acronix was with you, too.”

“I’m here!” Acronix sat up from where he was lying down on the couch. “What do you need me for?”

Skylor sat on a chair and clasped her hands together. “I’m here with an offer,” she said. “You are all villains who’ve been defeated by the ninja, and to many people that’s all you will be.”

Ronin snorted. “Speak for yourself, Chen’s daughter,” he said. “I’m an ally now.”

“Yes, to many people, I’ll only be Chen’s daughter,” Skylor said. “And to many people, you’ll only be the thief who got his soul cursed.”

“Hey—”

“What I’m offering,” Skylor continued, “is an opportunity to change that. You could improve your image by helping Ninjago, working… not alongside the ninja, but picking up where they leave off.”

Morro frowned. “So what, we’ll take care of the bad guys they leave behind? And people start to like us for it?”

“In a sense, yes.”

“I won’t,” Aspheera said. “I’m perfectly happy being known as the evil Aspheera who wanted to destroy Ninjago. As long as nobody bothers me, I don’t need to be anything more.”

“I’ll do it,” Acronix said.

Everyone turned to him. “You will?” Ronin said in surprise. “Why?”

Acronix looked at his lap and twisted his hands together. “I love Ninjago,” he said. “My brother and I… we both did. We wanted what was best for it, and then we were wrong about what that was. I… I want to serve Ninjago, not just enforce our will on it.”

Skylor nodded. “I understand.”

“I could do it,” Morro said, floating lazily on his back in midair. “Y’know, to prove to Wu that I’m not a failure, and I can do everything his Green Ninja can do.”

“Well, damn,” Ronin said. “Can’t let this brat one-up me. Sure, I’ll come along, too.”

Morro leaned his head back and stuck his tongue out at him.

“This is ridiculous,” Aspheera said. “You’re really willing to risk your lives for a place that doesn’t care about you? You don’t even know what it is you’ll be doing!”

“You’re right,” Skylor said. “I should’ve been upfront with that. I want to stop a rogue nindroid from threatening Ninjago City before he gets himself killed.”

Aspheera winced. One look at Acronix and Ronin showed they felt the same way. Morro cackled. “Told you it was a bad idea!”

“Fine,” Aspheera said. “Do what you want. I’m staying here.”

“Are you sure?” Acronix said. “It would be nice to have you with us…”

“No it wouldn’t. We’re together out of necessity, not a genuine bond.” Aspheera turned away. “Have fun, or don’t, but don’t complain to me about it.”

She slithered to her room, ignoring the hurt looks on the others’ faces, and closed the door behind her.

She didn’t really care about them, Aspheera told herself. Not like she had cared about Wu, before his betrayal, and not like she would ever care about anyone again. She stayed in her room until she was certain they had left, and longer, just to make sure.

When she exited, the house was dark.

Aspheera let out a long hiss, flicking her tongue. They would be fine. Even Morro knew how to behave when his life, or lack of it, was on the line. Acronix was a kind man, he wouldn’t get in trouble. And Ronin had been straddling the line of “ally” and “enemy” for his whole life. They would all be fine, especially with Skylor backing them up.

She just had to keep telling herself that.

Their hut wasn't too far away from Ninjago City. It had to be, so the police could step in if need be. Wu was upfront with her about that. Aspheera kept just off the main road, staying out of sight of the vehicles lumbering on their way.

As she entered the city itself, it was harder to stay out of sight. People on the street stopped to stare at her, pointing and whispering to their friends. Aspheera ignored them and followed the police sirens she could hear in the distance.

Predictably, Skylor, Acronix, Morro, and Ronin were surrounded by police. Aspheera spotted Cryptor with them as well. They were clustered together, standing stiff and straight in front of Wu. Aspheera snorted and weaved her way through the crowd.

"What did you think you were doing?" she heard Wu say as she got closer. "You should've let my students handle this."

"We were just trying to help," Skylor protested. "How can you be mad at us for this?"

Wu shook his head. "Skylor, I know you have the best interests of Ninjago at heart, but I can't say the same for the rest of your friends."

"That's enough," Aspheera announced, ducking under the police tape and gently pushing one of the officers aside. "Do you have a problem, Wu?"

Wu turned to her. "Aspheera?" he said in surprise, keeping her in his gaze as she positioned herself between him and the others. "Was this your idea?"

Aspheera rolled her eyes. "Not exactly. I was content to stay in that hut for the rest of my days, but, well, can you say you control your students all the time?"

Wu raised an eyebrow. "What do my students have to do with this?"

"You have your students, and I have mine." Aspheera motioned to the group. "Come along, children. It's time to go home."

Ronin let out a snort. "Children? Really?"

"I am over a thousand years old. You are all children to me." Aspheera gave one glare to the police and they cleared a path for her. "Now hurry up."

"You can't just leave—"

"I can and I will," Aspheera said. "Or will you try to stop me, Wu?"

Wu let out a long sigh. "Fine," he said. "Best of luck, Aspheera."

Back at the hut, Cryptor was exceedingly grumpy. "I am not your student," he told Aspheera, "and you can't make me stay."

His body was dripping oil, or some other liquid Aspheera couldn't identify. "Very well," she said. "Would you like repairs before you go?"

"No," Cryptor said. He didn't move to leave. Aspheera watched him until he sighed and said, "Yes."

Skylor approached her while Ronin worked on Cryptor. "Students, huh?" she said. "Thought you didn't care about us."

Aspheera rolled her eyes. "I said some things I didn't mean, back there," she said. "Would you like to stay the night? It's getting late."

"I dunno, your couch is spoken for already."

"Morro doesn't sleep, you can have his room."

"*What!*" Morro shrieked. Skylor stifled a giggle.

Aspheera smiled too, but it didn't last. "You don't just want us to clean up what the ninja don't," she said to Skylor. "What was your real intention in going after Cryptor today?"

Skylor looked away. "I know it doesn't seem like it," she said, "but I really was a bad kid. I don't think every bad kid is doomed to be like that forever. I want to give them a second chance, y'know? Help them be better people."

Aspheera nodded. "And you went behind Wu's back for this?"

"Not exactly—"

"Don't be ashamed, I'm proud of you!" Aspheera laughed. "Who would you have us help next?"

Skylor relaxed and smiled at her. "Well, there's this one girl I used to know. She's in Kryptarium now, but I'm sure if one of us visited her, she might appreciate it…"

A shout from Ronin distracted them, and they looked to see him batting away a giggling Morro. Acronix laughed and took pictures with his BorgPad. Cryptor growled, but stayed put, and allowed Ronin to finish his repairs. He left that night, but he was back the next morning.

As the days went on, and her students worked together, Aspheera wondered if Wu was proud of her. She told herself she didn't care, but when she encountered him in Ninjago, she could've sworn she saw a smile behind his beard. Was this what he had planned all along? Well, it didn't matter. Aspheera was happy, too.

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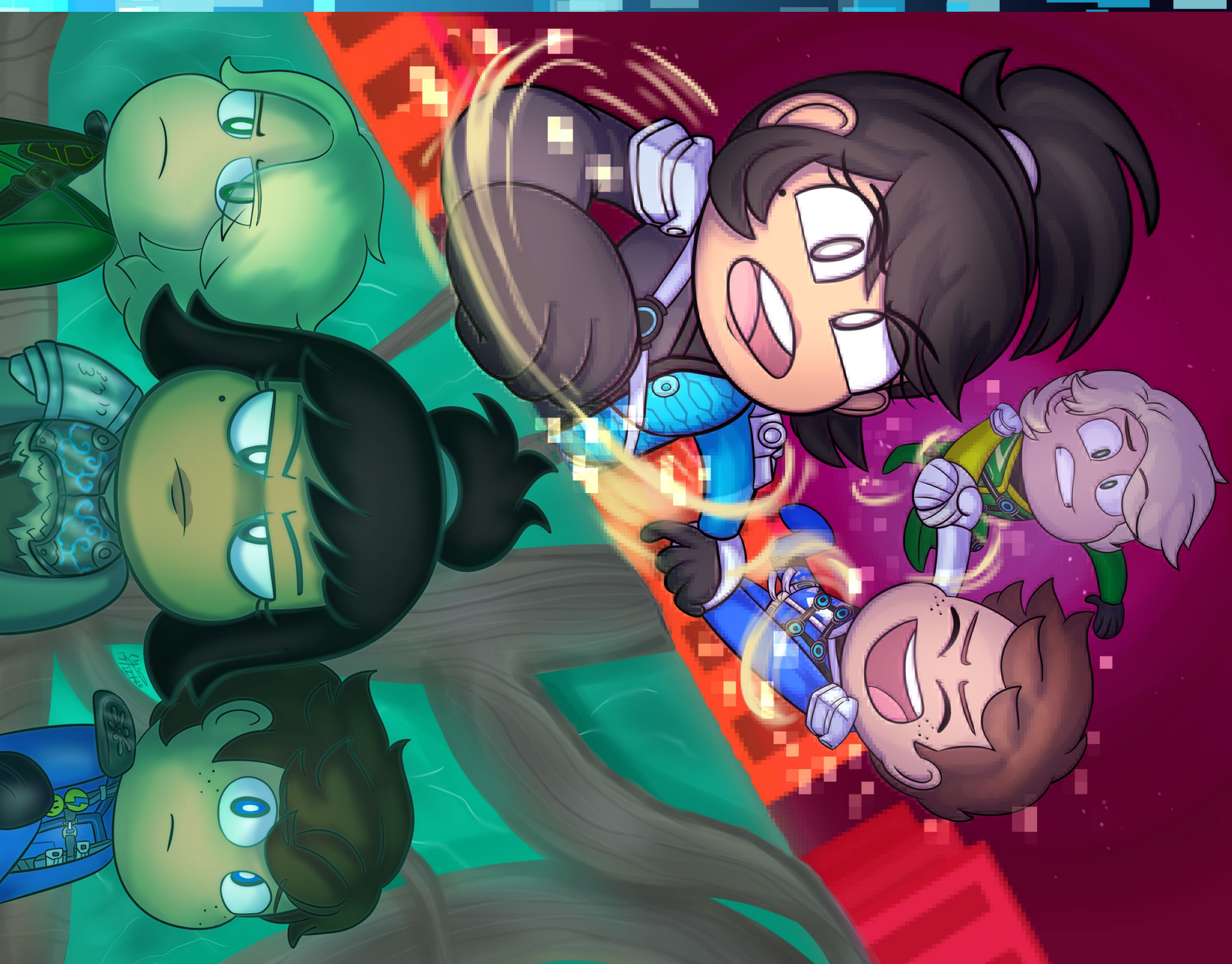

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DIAL N FOR NINDROIDS

STARRING ZANE JULIEN AND P.I.X.A.L. BORG

NINJAGO CONFIDTENTIAL

AND FEATURING

ZANE · PIXAL · MILTON DYER · DERETH

“Hold Me Close and Give Me Closure”

Vesper Rose

For the last couple hours, Jay’s been staring up at the ceiling in his room. His head is full of thoughts that won’t leave him. Preventing him from getting the rest he needs after everything that happened in Prime Empire.

He can’t stop thinking about what he said to Unagami. How he knows what it feels like to be abandoned by your maker, and for his case, parents.

Cliff Gordon still died even without Nadakhans influence. The only thing that changed was that he didn’t inherit all of his money and estate.

Not yet, anyway.

And as for the master of lightning, his real mom, he has no idea what happened to her. He’s tried to look her up, but could only find that she mysteriously disappeared a couple of months before he was put on his parents’ doorstep. his adoption day, what his parents considered his birthday.

He found out his mom’s name is Lisbeth during his search. That’s one thing he knows about her now.

He hasn’t worked up the courage to ask his parents about this.

But it makes him wonder. What would life be like if he was the son of a movie star and the elemental master of lightning? If he were rich instead of borderline poor. If he lived in an actual house instead of a trailer.

He didn’t hate growing up in a junkyard. He learned things that he wouldn’t have learned if he didn’t. He loves his parents, and they love him. He knows they’re proud of him; he knows they accept him for who he is, for what he is, for what he does. They love him no matter what. Jay inhales sharply and a lump forms in his throat.

He needs to talk to someone about this. Because if he doesn’t, he’s just going to keep on thinking about it and never act on it.

Because Unagami was able to find solace, so why shouldn’t he?

He could ask his parents what they know about his birth parents, but he doubts they know a lot.

Master Wu? He would know about his mom.

Sitting up, he takes his phone off his nightstand, blinking at the sudden brightness, and heads to the messaging app. His thumb hovers over his mom and checks the time first, 1 am. Too late for her to be awake.

So instead, he opens Nya’s. She knows this about him. She knows that he’s been struggling with bringing this up with his parents. Because there’s never been the right time to do so.

Jay hopes that she’s still awake.

Jay: are you awake?

Nya: yeah?

Nya: just barely tho, why?

Jay: I’ve been,,,,,,, thinking about things

Jay: can you come here?

Jay: I need you

Nya: omw

It took a moment for Nya to respond, and when she did, that’s when the dam broke. As soon as he puts his phone back down on the nightstand, he lets out a choked sob. Everything crashing down onto him all at once. Everything from the past few days to Nadakhan years ago comes flooding back, so suddenly and fiercely that it feels like a wrecking ball has crashed right into him, knocking down the walls that were barely there at all.

Everything that happened in the game was almost nothing compared to the torture he endured on Nadakhan’s ship, but to see his friends, all literally dropping like flies for the second time in his life. That took a toll on him.

He couldn’t wish that all away.

At least no one was permanently dead this time.

But the pain of being alone right now is almost too much for him to bear.

There’s a soft knock on the door before it opens slightly, Nya pokes her head in, sees Jay crying, and rushes in, a frown on her face as she gets into his bed, she pulls him into her lap and hugs him tight.

“Are you okay?” she asks him after a moment.

“Better now that you’re here,” he says with a sniffle, taking one of her hands into his.

“N-not really. I- I was just thinking about things, about my birth parents an- and then I wanted to talk to you about it because you’re the only one who knows about this, b- but then its spiraled into remembering everything that happened in the past few days and everything with Nadakhan, and- and how I was the only one left because you and everyone else was taken away from me. I couldn’t do anything about it, I couldn’t bring you back. I… I lost you.” jay says, clinging to his girlfriend and yang like his life depended on it. “I don’t think I can be alone anymore.”

“Because all it does is remind you of when you lost everyone, right?”

“y-yeah. Can- can you stay here?”

“Of course.” she kisses his hand, “I’ll stay as long as you need me to. If you want to talk, I’m here.”

“Okay,” he says with a sniffle. It only takes him a few minutes to calm down, and he sits up. Realizing that Nya has her hair down, he’s rarely seen her with her hair down as of recently. He likes it. “You’re pretty with your hair down,” he moves a strand away from her face.

She smiles and kisses him, “I take that as you’d like for me to have it down more?”

He kisses her back, “maybe,” he lays back down, pulling her down with him, “you always play with my hair. I can’t do it with you because it’s up all the time.”

“Yours is soft,” she kisses him again, “also you’re shorter than me, which makes it easier.”

“Aw, no fair.” he laughs, “I think I’m ready to talk now,” he says, much more seriously.

“What’d you want to talk about?” she asks, putting her head on his chest, to allow him to play with her hair as he talks.

“Just… about my parents? My birth parents, I mean. I did some research, and I found out the name of my birth mom. Her name was Lisbeth. She fought in the serpentine war with Wu and Garmadon and against the time twins.”

“I saw her when Kai and I went back in time to stop Krux and Acronix. She and the former master of ice seemed to be good friends. She talked about how she and Cliff were going to go on their honeymoon.” Nya smiles.

“You saw her?” he whispers incredulously, “why didn’t you tell me?”

“I forgot, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he says with a shaky sigh. “I would’ve told my parents after we told the others what happened with Nadakhan, but I didn’t know how to. There’s never a right time to do it.”

“I could come with you. Would that make it easier?” Nya offers, taking his hand in hers, squeezing it in comfort.

“Y-yeah, that would help a lot. Do you think we should go to master Wu? He knew my mom. He probably automatically knew that I was adopted when my parents showed up but said nothing about courtesy, you know?”

“If you feel like that would help. I think that’s a good idea.”

“I think it might.” he kisses her hand and then yawns. The events of the day have finally caught up to him.

“Getting tired?” Nya asks him teasingly.

“Maybe.” he yawns again. “Please don’t leave.”

“I already said I’m not going anywhere.” Nya reassures him.

“I-I know.”

Nya scoots up to face him, placing a kiss on his lips in reassurance. “You don’t have to worry about anything. I’ve told you I won’t leave. I never will. You’re my yin and I’m your yang. I’ll be here when you wake up, I’ll be with you, forever.”

He nods with a smile, kissing her back. “I love you.” he yawns again, drifting off to sleep with his girlfriend beside him.

Jay was able to fall asleep relatively quickly and easily now that Nya was here with him, and he wasn’t in the suffocating abyss that was being alone. He didn’t have any dreams either, which he takes as a good thing because more often than not, it’s a nightmare.

When he wakes up that morning, Nya is still there, arms wrapped around his torso and head by his shoulder. He can feel her breath on his neck.

Even though he did not dream last night, he still finds relief that she’s still here and still alive.

So Jay just stays still, the best he can, anyway. He doesn’t want to wake Nya up from her slumber. But because of their unfortunately messed up internal clocks thanks to waking up at dawn for training, she’s awake not long later.

“Good morning.” she says to him with a smile, “did you sleep well?”

“Yeah, didn’t dream at all.”

“Better than nightmares,” she says sympathetically, sitting up.

“Did you have any?” he frowns.

“No, it was just a weird one.” she shrugs, “let’s go see if any of the others are awake.”

Since it was still less than 24 hours since their latest escapade, there’s no mandatory morning training today. So the two of them head towards the kitchen with pajamas and all still on.

“Good morning, you two,” Pixal says with a smile as she and Zane prepare that morning’s breakfast.

“Morning, Pix,” Nya says with a yawn and gets a cup of coffee for herself and then sits across from her brother and jay sitting down next to her.

Kai looks up for a second and gives the two a scrutinizing look, “hey,” he says, “you left your door open.”

Nya just shrugs at that, “and?”

“Nothing, I’m just saying.”

Moments later, Cole and Lloyd enter, just as Zane and Pixal have finished making breakfast.

“I apologize if it’s not as good as Zane making it by himself. I am still learning how to cook.”

“It’s okay, pix, its still good!” Cole grins, making the samurai shrink in on herself slightly.

“I also think you did well,” Zane says, giving her a warm smile. “Pixal and I were going to go talk to Cyrus Borg today with Milton Dyer and Unagami. Would any of you like to join us?” he glances at Jay for a split second.

“I’m not up for it today, maybe next time?” he says automatically.

“Oh.” Zane blinks. He must’ve thought he would’ve liked to come along, but there’s a bitter feeling somewhere within him when he thinks about how Unagami got their happy ending. That they and Milton could reunite. These feelings weren’t there last night. He’s… never really felt this way before. “That’s alright. Would you like me to tell them hello?”

“Sure.” a small smile on his face, but he can’t shake this foreign feeling as he eats the rest of his breakfast. Jealousy? He doesn’t like it.

Nya takes his hand and squeezes it as if detecting his feelings. “I’ll join next time, too. I’ve been meaning to get some things done.”

Zane nods, though he doesn’t seem entirely convinced. They all know each other too well. Once Jay finishes his breakfast, he waits for Nya to be done before going back to his room to change, Nya waiting by his door for him so they can talk to Master Wu. He puts his ninja gi on out of habit, not even thinking about putting on his casual clothes since there is always a chance that something could happen. He then waits for Nya to get changed, she wears her gi out of habit too.

Going up to master Wu’s door, he cracks it, “Master Wu?” He asks tentatively.
“Come on in.” Master Wu says, looking up at the two of them, “Is everything alright? There seems to be something troubling you.”

“You knew the original master of lightning right?”

A warm smile appears on Wu’s face. “I did. I was wondering when you would come to ask about your birth mother.”

Jay laughs, “of- of course, you would know.” he says, not knowing whether to be relieved or upset by this.

“I knew ever since your parents came to visit. Though I knew it was not my place to say anything.” Wu confirms what Jay had said last night.

“Right, yeah. The thing is though, my parents still don’t know that I know. Cause the whole thing with Nadakhan, and I just honestly haven’t worked up the courage to ask them.”

“That’s alright, Jay. You will one day.” he puts a hand on the blue ninja’s shoulder, “what would you like to know about her?”

“What… what was she like?”

“She was wonderful and very kind. She cared about all the other members of the elemental alliance greatly. She wormed her way into Garmadon’s heart and they were close friends. She and the former master of ice were good friends as well. I see a lot of her in you. You both talk a lot.” he chuckles. “I remember the day she met your birth father,”

“Did you ever get to meet him?”

“Briefly, she invited everyone to their wedding. He was a nice man.”

“We were planning on asking my parents about her too, were her and my mom close as well?”

“Yes. your mother, the former master of shadow, and eventually Cole’s mother when she gained her powers were good friends. I’m not sure what the extent of their friendship was, you’ll have to ask her.”

“Do- do you know what happened to her?” Jay asks, frowning, “her name was Lisbeth, right? I looked up who the former elemental masters were, and she came up.”

Wu’s smile turns into a frown, only to return a moment later with a sad look in his eyes. “Yes. that was her name. She went by Libber most of the time. Though unfortunately, I don’t know what happened to her. I did my best to keep track of all the elemental masters and their descendants, but she disappeared one day and left you at your parents.”

“Th-thank you, Master Wu,” he says, starting to tear up again. That strange, jealous feeling he had earlier has gone away. He has that closure he wanted for a while now. He, Master Wu, and Nya talk about his mother and the other former masters for a while longer. Jay may not know what happened to her, but at least he knows a little more about his mother.

Pocket Flutter

MAB
SHADOW
16 VII 2020
& @LightningVirus_

"*Orange*"

fabro-de-omres

The wings of the Shintaro are all sleek lines and silken feathers, painstakingly crafted down to each individual vane. The Shintarans glide effortlessly through their city on them, robes neat and unruffled, nary a hair out of place when they take off and land again. They are a stunning display of craftsmanship and technology, way beyond anything that Ninjago has ever seen.

They also are completely bare of heart-colors.

See, in Ninjago, people are born with pure white wings. As you grow older, and grow your family and friends, their heart-colors (the unique patch of color hidden on the feathers near every person's back) appear on your feathers. Zane has the color of his creator spattered across his right wing. Kai and Nya have each other's colors covering their mantles. Jay carries both sets of his parents' colors, and Lloyd has each of the ninja's colors staining his wings so violently that he looks like he was in some sort of studio accident.

And Cole? Cole's left wing, near the wingtip, is painted in the rich gold of his father. His left bears the faded orange of his mother. Across the backs of his wings, the rest of the ninja's colors wrap around his coverts like a warm blanket.

Vania has just been crowned queen of Shintaro, and the coronation celebration is going long into the night. Cole watches her from the edge of the crowd, smiling at the way she is completely unselfconscious as she dances in the middle of the room with Chompy spiraling around her feet. She catches his eye and her face lights up; she breaks from the circle and flings herself towards him. Cole loses her in the crowd, but by the frantic strings of apologies and yelping he hears, he has a pretty good idea where she is.

"Cole!" she shouts, when she finally breaks through. "I haven't seen you all night! Have you been avoiding me?"

Cole laughs. "Never, my queen," he says, winking exaggeratedly when he uses her new title. "You've just been busy." He grins wide. "I get it, I get it, what's a little old ninja to the queen of an entire country?"

Vania pouts. "It's not like that. Everyone wants my attention, but you guys are my friends. And you're leaving soon, way before everyone else!" A glint of an idea enters her eye- the same look she had before leading Cole to a drainage tunnel and whipping a set of torches from nowhere. "It's too noisy in here for anything, let alone talking. How about we go for a little night time flight?"

She hikes up her skirts and marches through the crowd. Cole laughs a little disbelievingly. He follows her out, out onto the terrace, wings pulled close to his sides to prevent them being jostled or stepped on. "Wait, can you just leave like that?"

Vania smiles with all her teeth. She signals to an attendant and they reappear with her wings, attaching and securing them to her back. "What do you mean?" she asks, cocking her head playfully to one side. "I'm the queen! I can do what I want!"

"Hey, works for me," Cole says, grinning back. He lets his wings unfurl to nearly their full wingspan, an impressive eighteen feet with his flight feathers outstretched. "Just don't start whining when I fly circles around you."

"Hey, that's not nice!" She narrows her eyes at him. "Just for that, I won't let you win."

"Oh, so you were planning to originally?"

They take to the sky, chasing each other around the spires and drifting lazily through the moonlit clouds. Cole marvels at the way her wings cut through the air, silent and smooth like a knife. His own are built for power and speed but not so much for grace. He's sure they make quite the picture above the partygoers. That is, if any of them bothered to look up.

As their flight comes to an end, they alight on the highest balcony overlooking the courtyard. Vania releases her wings, something that used to shock Cole before he got over it through repeated proximity and exposure. His own wings he splays behind him, their motley of colors nearly twinkling in the low candlelight.

"I used to think your wings were so funny-looking when we first met," Vania says suddenly.

Cole glances up at her sharply. "Huh?"

She smiles and sits down gently beside him. The night air is cool and a slight breeze tugs at both of their bangs. "Your wings," she says again. "I mean, I still do. They're entirely too much wingspan for any one person to have."

"Better to catch you with," Cole replies, the winner of their earlier game of tag.

Vania rolls her eyes. "Not just the size of them though. I couldn't believe how colorful they were! There are so many different colors that your wings were kinda ugly."

"Thanks," Cole deadpans. "I'm really feeling the love."

"Exactly!" she exclaims. "They're the colors of the people who love you, right? I almost didn't believe my tutor when he told me that, but I couldn't think of any other reason why anyone would dye their feathers that way." She hesitates, one hand held in an aborted movement towards his wings. "Can I- I mean, would you mind telling me about them?"

Talking about heart-colors isn't necessarily a taboo subject. Most people just prefer to keep their relationships and stories more private than not. Looking at Vania's hopeful face, half-illuminated orange by candlelight, Cole finds that he isn't most people.

"Yeah, sure," he says, scooting over so he can fan his wings out. "So you probably could have guessed, but all these ones are the other ninja's." He points out Kai's sienna, Jay's pretty blue, Zane's periwinkle, Nya's warm maroon, and Lloyd's bright green that make up the colors on his coverts.

“This one’s my dad’s,” he says next, stretching out his left wing so the gold catches the candlelight. “Both of my parents’ colors came in together, of course, but he saw his first because it was a little bit darker than my mom’s.” He can remember it now, through the haziness of his three-year-old-self’s memory: his dad’s face hovering over him, eyes wide and face caught in some unidentifiable emotion.

Reverence, Cole thinks now, years and years later. It’s the same look Kai’s mom and dad give him and Nya when they work side-by-side. It’s the same look he gave baby Wu, captured and immortalized forever on the tiny polaroid he keeps tucked away in his drawer.

Vania is watching him with a soft expression on her face. Cole sighs, drawing himself from his memories. He stretches out his other wing, wrapping it around his front so the color is on display. “And this was hers,” he says softly. “My Mom’s.”

“Lilly,” Vania echoes.

Cole nods. The color on the tips of his feathers is faded now, looking peach instead of the vibrant orange of his childhood. “For a long time, I couldn’t bear to look at it,” he admits, staring at the floor. “I’d catch a glimpse out of the corner of my eye, and I hated it so much. It was a brand of everything I’d lost, taunting me with how much it hurt.”

Vania seems to glow in the candlelight. “What changed?” she asks.

Cole shrugs, feels how it costs him to be so nonchalant about it. “The color started fading,” he says simply. “And I realized that remembering, even though it was so painful, was so much more important that losing her forever.”

Vania is silent. She hovers her hand over his wings, silently asking permission, and when Cole doesn’t do anything to stop her she drags her fingers gently over soft feathers. Cole angles his wing so the vulnerable inner parts aren’t exposed, but other than that the petting feels nice. It’s been so long since someone other than himself touched his wings like this- the ninja, for how much they love each other, are perpetually running off on some hairbrained adventure or another and don’t usually have time for group preening.

“That’s it,” Vania says eventually, hand stilling over his coverts. “That’s why I changed my mind about your culture’s wings.” Her gaze travels somewhere toward the right, somewhere toward where her technologically-flawless and meticulously-kept wings rest against the railing. Technologically-flawless, meticulously-kept, and completely bare of heart-color. “I wish, sometimes-”

She cuts herself off. “It’s not good to think about what-ifs,” she decides firmly, fixing a smile on her face. Still, her fingers linger a second longer in his golden feathers. “It must be nice, knowing that you are so loved.”

Cole closes his eyes. The breeze washes over his hair, carrying with it the slight sounds of the party and his team laughing from below.

“Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, it is.”

“A Piece of Lilly”

Kurinhyi

The death of his mother has always been a hard one for Cole to properly process. Him and his mother were closer than anything - he trusted her, confided in her when his young mind was processing the new emotions that were beginning to pour in when she was diagnosed with an illness that he, and by extension, his father, didn’t fully understand. The only thing Cole knew was that his mother was a fighter - and that she wasn’t going to go down not fighting.

And by God--she did.

There was a lot that Cole remembered about his mother. How she and his father would dance together during a full moon, or how she would constantly check on him to make sure he’s okay. To the way she smiled at him during her bed rest and assured him that she would be okay, to her slowly loosening grip when her illness got the better of her… But he doesn’t like to think too much about her passing. He doesn’t like to think about how he and his father had different ways of coping with her loss. In fact - it felt as though Lou had managed to move on faster than he could.

Climbing mountains was all Cole had after his mother--Lilly, passed away. It’s what they did all the time when she was healthy - that was their thing. Lou wasn’t a big fan of it, but he saw how happy it made Cole - and how happy it made his wife, so just as long as they were safe… that’s all that mattered to him, in the end. Just as long as they came home safe, happy, and sound, Lou would deal with it.

But the first day Cole came home from rock climbing by himself, sweat beading down his face and a sombre expression on his face, is a day that Lou could admittedly never forget.

It’s one that Cole can’t forget, either.

He held onto the memories of his mother tightly and dearly. They were memories he never wanted to forget, memories that would shape him into the ninja he became today.

When the ninja received an invitation to the island of Shintaro, Cole didn’t really have an opinion on it - not at first, anyways. Sure, he thought that Princess Vania was cute and all, but he wasn’t entirely interested in her the way that Lloyd seemed to think he was. He found it charming that she was such a big fan of the ninja-and by extension, him, but other than that… Shintaro was supposed to be a form of getaway. Something to bring Wu’s spirits up again, maybe a place for him to relax. Just for a week or so, before they had to go back home and be greeted to the hell that would inevitably be unleashed, just as it always was.

Cole would never forget the first night they arrived on Shintaro, when--at the time, a stranger would break into the room he stayed in the night, and he noticed that the stranger had a locket containing the images of both his mother and father.

The secrets of Shintaro would soon come to unravel itself, and Cole’s connection with his mother was… well, it was stronger than ever. He had finally understood what she had done in the years before she had him, and how much of a hero she was. He had only heard of tales, but he had never gotten the chance to fully experience it. She would tell him stories of her adventures, and always end it saying the same thing.

Promise me that you will always stand up to those who are cruel and unjust. Always.

So, he did.

After the defeat of the Skull Sorcerer--Vania’s father, the island of Shintaro could finally find peace. It was a rather peaceful island in the first place, despite some grievances. But there was a lot that not even it’s own people knew, that Cole and the rest of the ninja would soon come to discover. As usual, they worked together when they could get the chance to be reunited, and the Skull Sorcerer was brought to an end. Things should be fine, right…?

…

… …

… … …

“***Cole?***” A familiar voice calls out to the elemental of earth - the voice of Jay, the man Cole considered his best friend. He noticed that Cole didn’t come down to join everyone as everything was over--instead, he stood at the cliff, where he and Vania’s father fought, staring down at the ground.

The sound of Jay’s voice causes Cole to startle. He looks over his shoulder, only acknowledging his friend.

But he doesn’t say anything.

“***Are you alright?***” Jay’s voice is soft. He approaches Cole, putting a hand on his shoulder. With a concerned look on his face, his eyes meet with Cole’s - and Cole only gives a small smile. Although small, it’s clear that it’s a genuine smile - something that brought some comfort to Jay.

“***Yeah.***” Cole finally replies.

“***It’s just…***” He starts to say. His voice is still quiet.

“***My mother’s blades…***”

Jay loses his smile, too.

Cole didn't have much to remember of his mother. Just her kind words that she would give to him, the day she passed away - just the memories of climbing mountains with her. Her memories, but very little physical objects. The blades, although he had it for a short time…

Those were all he had left of her.

The ninja never really had much time to themselves when they returned home from a mission, or a getaway. They would typically only get a week of freetime, and most of the time - they would choose to just hang out with one another, playing video games and going out for food when given the chance.

Things were a little bit different this time around, however - as Kai approaches his parents blacksmith shop. A small bag rests against his hip, containing one of the pieces of the blade that Jay managed to grab when Cole wasn't looking. Jay had approached Kai, away from everyone else holding the shard in his hands, asking if there's something that Kai could do with it, to later give to Cole so that he could have a small piece of his mother's blade with him forever. Kai agreed, of course - as he noticed that ever since they've been back, Cole has been spending more time to himself.

He seemed happier, more content with himself - that's for sure. But he could tell that something was weighing heavily on his mind. Cole discovered all the secrets of his mother within the time frame of just a few days, it must've been a lot for him to comprehend at once.

So, Kai agreed to at least help Jay out with getting a piece of the blade back to Cole - as a keepsake, something for him to hold onto when he needs it. But the problem was, he didn't know how. He wasn't entirely the best when it came to making handmade things (except, of course, when it came to weapons. That's probably why Jay approached him, but truthfully...there was only so much you could do with just a portion of a previous weapon.) - but he would try, if it meant that it could bring Cole some peace.

"*Kai!*" He hears his name called out to him, and a smile forms on his face. Ever since he had discovered his parents and saved them, they had comfortably made their way back home to the blacksmith shop and could live a life in peace knowing that they didn't need to be conforming to the expectations of a side that they didn't want to be on. He and Nya had gone out of their way to visit them at least once every other day, just to check up on them to see how they were doing and if they needed anything - as well as to just spend some time with them.

It doesn't take much time for Ray to quickly approach Kai, pulling him into a hug that lasts for just a few moments. Kai returns the hug, looking up towards Ray as he steps away, the smile on his face not faltering even once.

"*Hey, dad.*" Kai greets him, before standing on the tips of his toes to glance over Ray's shoulder.

"*Where's mom? There's something I wanna ask her...*" Kai is quick to get to the point - not that it surprised Ray, really. He was the type to jump straight to points, too - he had to get it from *somewhere.*

"*She's inside,*" Ray responds, glancing over his shoulder to gesture at the home that stood directly next to the blacksmith shop. "*What do you need?*"

Kai puts his hand over the pouch that rests against his hip - causing Ray to glance down towards the pouch, too. He's curious, wanting to know what's inside of it - but he doesn't have to wait too long for an answer. Kai slips his hand into the pouch, pulling out a medium sized piece of one of the broken blades of the weapons who previously belonged to Lilly. Upon first sight of it, Ray's expression softens, and the smile previously on his face softens.

"*We went to the island of Shintaro a couple days ago,*" Kai starts to explain, as his eyes lock onto the piece of the blade that rests in his hands. "*I wasn't with him the entire time, but I know there was a lot about his mom that Cole discovered. He even got a hold of her weapon… but it broke on him at the very end. He seems torn up about it, Jay told me that he said he didn't have anything else to remember his mother by.*" He pauses.

"*Jay asked me if I could go and do something with this piece that he salvaged when Cole wasn't looking. But I'm not good at coming up with things on the spot, and it's not like I can take this small piece and make it into another weapon. I don't think Cole would want that...so I wanted to ask mom for help, or if she had any other ideas.*" Kai notices Ray extending his hand out towards the remnant of the blade resting in his hands, and curiously - Kai holds it out for his father to grab.

So he does - plucking it from Kai's hand, Ray looks over the shard. The first thing he notices is an engraving on the other side of it - Lilly's first name. If there was a second piece that had her last name carved into it-- it wasn't there. Ray's expression is soft, as he looks over the blade.

"*I haven't seen Lilly in so long.*" He mumbles under his breath, before he returns the blade to Kai's hand. "*Her and Maya… they were close. I'm sure she'd be able to figure something out.*"

Kai looks down towards the blade. He had a bit of a suspicion that his mother could've been close to Lilly - but hearing it confirmed hit him a bit harder than he thought it would. He nods, after taking a moment to process the words Ray throws at him, as he looks towards the house that he and Nya used to live in. The house where he practically raised Nya-- all by himself, after their parents disappeared on them for reasons unknown to him at the time. It felt bittersweet coming back every time he did - but he would choose to push those feelings to the side, as he takes a step towards his childhood home.

He's about to knock on the door - but is greeted by the door opening, and the face of his smiling mother - who's more than happy to see her son again. "*Kai!*" She greets him, happily - as she pulls him into her arms and hugs him tight.

Kai finds himself laughing. Being pulled into his mother's arms was always something that was seen as embarrassing. But for Kai, it was more than welcomed - he didn't get to experience it too much growing up. But she pulls away, looking down at him. The smile on her face stays, but her expression softens. She sees the remnants of Lilly's blade, and she holds out her hand to get a closer look at it.

Kai nods, bringing the blade into her hands. He watches, as she looks the piece over and over, taking a step back inside before she leans herself back against the wall. She lets out a little sigh, as she holds up the blade to the light.

"*Lilly's weapon was beautiful. Don't you think so?*" Maya asks, looking towards Kai through her peripheral vision.

"*I didn't get to see it up close, but from what I saw...yeah. It was.*" Kai drags his feet towards the nearby couch, plopping himself down on it. He rests his elbows on his legs, as he glances up towards Maya and watches her stare at the blade for a few seconds longer. "*Jay brought that to me. He asked if I could maybe go and make something for Cole, her blades were the only things he had of her, but they ended up breaking in combat. He's fine, but… he's clearly torn up about it. We want to give him something to remember his mom by. But I only know how to make weapons, and nothing creative like that...so, I was wondering if you had any ideas.*"

"*So I've heard. Your dad's got a loud voice. Plus, the windows open.*" Maya smiles down at Kai, giggling, as she pushes herself off the wall and hands the blade back to him. She makes her way over to the table in the living room, grabbing a hair-tie from it that she uses to quickly tie her hair up into a ponytail.

"*We could smooth out the edges and make it a pendant. There's a part of the blade that says Lilly's name, it would be best to make sure we can see that...why don't we make a necklace? That way, Cole can choose to wear it, hang it up somewhere for display...do whatever he wants with it.*" She walks up to Kai, taking a seat next to him. She takes the blade from his hand again - this time, taking a moment to look at it.

The smile on her face turns to a more sombre one. "*Lilly was an amazing woman. She was so brave, everything she did was for the sake of others. From what I've seen of him, Cole takes after her greatly. He lost her at such a young age, I'm sure this will mean a lot to him…*" Maya turns her head to look at her son, as she wraps an arm around his shoulders and pulls him in towards her, just to give him a hug and rest her cheek against the top of his head.

"*What you and Jay are doing for him… it's nice. I'm sure he'll appreciate it.*" She tells him, holding him against her side for a few seconds longer. She eventually gets herself up, however, and stands up, turning herself around to look at Kai.

"*Well, let's get started on it, then!*"

The finished necklace is nothing short of stunning. It's rather simple, but the main pendant is surrounded in a form of clear coating, with a cast of iron encasing it in place. The side that says Lilly's name lays out front, clear for everyone to see. When Kai and Maya finished it together, Kai made sure to hold the necklace close to him, not wanting anything to happen to it. It doesn't take him long to make his way back to the dojo, and almost immediately, Jay approaches him.

"*Did you get something?*" He asks, and Kai nods.

He opens up his hands for Jay to take a look at the necklace, and Kai can swear... he can see Jay's eyes sparkling in astonishment.

"*Dude!*" Jay shouts, clear excitement in his voice. He quickly hushes his voice - glancing over his shoulder to make sure nobody heard him (*Nobody being Cole, of course.*) - before he looks at the necklace again and smiles. "*It's beautiful, you made this?*"

"*Of course I did!*" Kai waves a hand as he speaks - before he, too, lowers the tone of his voice and whispers: "*I mean, I had to ask my mom for help, but yeah. I did.*"

Before Jay gets the chance to potentially laugh at Kai for needing to ask his mom for help, Kai grabs a hold of Jay's hand, shoving the necklace into his hands. The action catches him off guard, but he finds himself gripping onto the necklace firmly.

"*You should be the one to give it to him.*" Kai says, looking down at Jay's hand for a moment. "*You had the idea in the first place. Plus, you're his best friend. It'd be better if he was receiving it from you.*"

Jay doesn't say anything for a moment. His lips remain parted, as if trying to find the right words to say. But he eventually nods, his lips curving into a smile.

"*Okay.*" He looks down to his hand, firmly gripping the necklace.

"*I will.*"

"*Cole, can you do me a favor?*"

It's been a few days since Kai had given Jay the necklace to give to Cole. Jay had contemplated on if he should give the necklace to him in private - or if he should wait for all the ninja to be gathered together somewhere before doing it. Due to the fact he had waited a couple of days before giving him the necklace, he had the chance to tell everyone else of his and Kai's plans. From when he stayed behind after checking on Cole after the defeat of the Skull Sorcerer and grabbing the first piece he saw, to Kai going back home to make something to give to Cole so that he can have something to remember his mother by.

Everyone was understanding of it - promising to not speak of it to Cole.

Jay had decided to just wait for a day when all of the ninja could be gathered together. They would always have dinner together, before they all went on their own ways to do whatever else they wanted.

Jay had been holding onto the necklace for so long now. When he felt everyone's eyes staring at him on this certain night, wondering if he was going to present it to him now, he decided it was about time to get it over with.

"*Yeah,*" Cole responds to Jay, looking at him with a raised brow. "*What do you need?*"

Kai specifically watches Jay, resting his hand against his cheek - his fingers just lightly covering his lips so he doesn't accidentally spill anything.

"*Can you close your eyes and hold out your hand?*"

The two ninja lock eyes with one another, Cole noticing that Jay's hands are balled tight against his lap. Their eye contact with one another felt just a tad awkward, and the request to close his eyes and hold out his hand was just a bit more awkward, but the earth elemental laughs beneath his breath.

"*Alright.*" Without another thought, Cole holds out his hand palm side up, already expecting that Jay will be putting something in his hand from the looks of Jay's tightly balled fists against his lap. He closes his eyes, and he can hear Jay take in a deep breath, before --

He feels something warm in his hand. Jay's hand? It lingers there for a moment, and Cole can't help but to laugh to himself, as he opens his eyes and looks down to his hand.

"*Jay, what are you--*"

Jay removes his hand from Cole's, and Cole's eyes widen as Jay's hand removes itself from Cole's, and he finds himself staring at a necklace resting in the palm of his hands. The pendant, however, catches his attention.

"*...Jay…*" Cole's voice comes out in a whisper, his voice cracking with clear emotion taking over it. He picks up one side of the necklace with one hand and adjusts it so he can hold the other side with both of his hands, and he stares at the pendant, long and hard.

"*When did you…*" Cole starts to question.

"*How did you…?*"

He looks up from the necklace to look at Jay, then to Kai - and then, to everyone else at the table, who watches him.

"*...When I came up to check on you…*" Jay starts to explain himself. He glances at Kai, as if asking him to back him up. "*And I saw you were staring at...the blades. You went back down first, but I grabbed the first piece I saw and asked Kai if he could help with getting something for you.*"

Kai quickly butts in, cutting Jay off before he can say anything else. "*Jay brought back the piece to me, and I brought it back home...my mom suggested that we make it into a necklace, or something. So that you can have a piece of her with you.*"

Cole turns his attention back to the necklace again, his lips parted and throat tight. He takes in a deep breath, trying to find the right words to say something.

But nothing comes.

It's silent for a few moments, as Cole stares at the necklace to himself. However, he breaks the silence, not wanting them to think that he doesn't like it, or anything.

"*You...you didn't need to,*" Cole starts to say, unable to tear his gaze away from the pendant. He finds himself staring at his mother's name, staring him in the face, and he closes his mouth quickly. He returns the necklace to one hand, closing his hand around the pendant as he looks towards Jay.

Then to Kai.

Then to everyone else at the table, at almost a complete loss of words.

"*I didn't…*" Jay nods, responding to Cole's statement.

"*But I wanted to. I'm not sure if you have anything to remember her by, but you looked so…*" He pauses, his eyes locking with Cole's again. "*...I don't know, sad? That her blades were broken. So… I thought it'd be nice if you could take some small piece of it home.*"

Cole doesn't say anything else. He looks down to his hand, clenching the pendant tightly, before he very carefully pushes himself up from the table.

It's quiet, with nobody saying a word. Cole can feel everyone's eyes on him, and it makes it hard for them to know if he even likes it.

Jay and Kai hold their breath - this was their idea. They just wanted to give something to Cole, but had they messed up…?

Before either of them get the chance to think further on it, Jay feels Cole's arms wrap tightly around his waist - and the taller man immediately buries his face into his neck. He can feel him trembling, and the tears that he's been clearly trying to hold back become too overbearing for him to try and hold back anymore. Almost immediately, Jay wraps his arms around Cole tightly, and Kai gets up from his seat to rush over towards the two of them. He places his hand against Cole's shoulder, a small smile forming on his lips.

"*Hey, it's okay…*" Jay's voice is soft, but his attempt at comfort only causes Cole to cry harder.

Cole once again doesn't respond to Jay's words of comfort - but his grip on him only grows tighter. It doesn't take a whole lot for Jay to guide Cole down, sitting him down carefully - and Kai follows suit, sitting near them and watching over the two of them quietly. It doesn't take much longer for everyone to get up from where they are, surrounding Cole as he allows himself to cry everything out against Jay. They wait, not wanting to force him to speak if he wasn't ready for it. They wanted him to speak when he wanted to, and take all the time he needed to process everything.

When he does pull away, however, he sniffles. He looks up at Jay, his eyes filled with tears, but he smiles.

He pulls away, looking towards everyone else - but locks eyes with Kai for a few seconds longer than everyone else.

"*Thank you…*" He mumbles, his voice cracking after speaking for the first time after crying for… who knows how long. He isn't even sure.

Pulling his arms away from Jay, he looks down to the pendant of the necklace in his hand. His other hand lifts, if only to brush his fingers against the pendant lightly. He picks the necklace up with his other hand and holds it up for a second, making sure that Lilly's name is visible, as he brings it up to his neck and reaches behind him, attempting to clasp the necklace together.

But there's only so much he can do when his hands are shaky, and he keeps missing the clasp.

"*Lemme help.*" Kai says, laughing under his breath as he gets up from where he sits. He moves behind Cole, his warm hands taking the clasps of the necklace as he connects the two together and moves to sit in front of Cole, looking at the work that both he and his mother made for him.

"*It looks great on you, Cole.*" Nya speaks up, as she sits up from where she sits. She leans lightly against Lloyd's back, a wide grin on her face - all while Lloyd flails just a bit and protests at her suddenly leaning all of her weight against him.

“*Nya-!*” Lloyd protests, but she quickly reaches down and puts her hand over his mouth.

Cole watches the two, and he can’t help but to snicker under his breath. He feels a hand against his shoulder, and he looks over to see who came to grab his attention.

“*Are you going to be okay, Cole?*” The sound of Zane’s voice rings through Cole’s ears, as his eyes meet the nindroid’s.

He parts his lips, taking a moment to himself to think on what he wants to say. A hand reaches up, if only to brush his fingers against the pendant again, and he can’t help but smile to himself.

So, Cole nods.

“*Yeah.*” He says, releasing a content sigh. “*I’m going to be fine. This was just…*”

Unexpected. He looks towards the group again, the smile on his face only growing wider. He keeps his hand against the pendant, his fingers brushing against Lilly’s name, and speaks up one more time.

“*Thank you.*”

"Bandages"

ABC

"–And then the head honcho comes right at me, wa-POW, and I totally panicked but, like, who wouldn't, you know, haha, so I just punched him and I guess Sensei Wu's training is working because I actually hit the guy with a real mean hook! I musta looked so *cool*–"

"Would you," Cole grit out, tugging tighter the bandages he was wrapping around Jay's arm, "shut up and stay still a moment?"

Jay sighed, tapping his foot on the floor. "Hmph. You're no fun."

"I'm trying to keep this mess from turning into a stupid big scar, motormouth, but if you wanna walk around looking like Frankenstein tried to steal your arm for his monster, that's your call."

Jay stuck his tongue out and feigned an offended huff–real height of maturity here–but thankfully, he quit fidgeting long enough for Cole to wrap the gauze around the gash, carefully rolling it down his arm before pulling it tight and neatly tucking in the end. The shorter ninja gingerly rolled his shoulder, testing how it felt, and then launched right back into rambling.

Cole resisted the annoyed urge to shake his head. Neither of them were badly hurt, but their mission could have easily turned out worse than it did. Their enemies were just run-of-the-mill highway robbers, sure, but underestimating a banal foe could get you in serious trouble; after all, Cole had underestimated Sensei Wu, and during his first lesson he'd learned of Wu's prowess the hard way. To make matters even better, Zane was out on a separate mission with Sensei Wu, and they still hadn't returned. If something had gone wrong (and Cole had thought of several ways it could have gone wrong. He always accounted for what could go wrong), Cole and Jay would've had to deal with the fallout all alone.

"I thought we weren't even gonna catch those guys, we were just camping out sooo long. I thought I was gonna fall asleep, and then we would've really been hooped!"

"You're welcome," Cole sighed, clasping the first-aid kit shut.

"Huh? Oh, thanks. But seriously, that was a weird night, dontcha think? If their horses didn't make all that noise, we woulda never caught 'em, but we totally suckered those suckas! I just crept up all sneaky-sneaky and spooked them into the next week, they didn't see it coming!"

"Jay!" First master, Cole couldn't keep it in anymore. He was going to be mature and bring it up after Jay was done speaking, but he'd forgotten being "done" speaking wasn't in Jay's vocabulary. At all. "You do realize how much danger you put yourself in last night, right?"

"I–"

"Nuh-uh." Cole halted the protest in its tracks, putting on his most authoritative '*I'm in charge and you* will *listen*' voice. "I don't wanna hear it. We had a plan, Jay. Wait for them to pass by your lookout spot on the road, then meet up with me so we could ambush them! And what do you do instead?"

"Uh, hear them getting up to trouble and execute the coolest takedown known to mankind?"

Jay was too much of a dork to ever be cool, but he was gonna let that one slide for now. More important problems at hand.

"You decide to sneak off while I'm not looking and charge their *camp*. That was an eight on one fight against robbers armed to the teeth. Zane's not here! Sensei's not here! We don't even know Spinjitzu yet! What if you'd gotten hurt, or worse? What then, huh? Who *knows* what would've happened if I hadn't noticed you were gone!"

His voice was rising a little bit at the end there, wasn't it. And he might have started pacing with agitation, too. Cole knew better than to be losing his cool …

But.

It had just been the two of them. Jay knew the plan, because he'd had it explained in excruciating detail, and then he'd broken from it, gone it alone, and nearly gotten himself killed. Cole had barely slept off the sound of his teammate's screaming, the blood dripping down his arm, the ruffled hair and ragged panting for breath, the debris lying around everywhere as muscular, angry criminals tried to hack him to bits …

And then all Jay could worry about was not the giant gash he'd immediately made Cole patch up because he was a wuss with blood, not the fact that he'd strayed from their plan, not the fact that the robbers nearly got away in the chaos of the fight. No, all he could think about was how crazy it was, and how cool he must have looked! How could Jay be so carefree and irresponsible about this sort of thing?

"And you know, I get it, think on your feet and all that. Gotta be a little flexible. It would've been okay if you'd just come back and gotten me after you found their camp! But you didn't even do that, you just went right in and helped yourself!" Cole threw his hands up in the air. "You're so irresponsible! Not everything is all fun and games! This isn't, like, Fist 2 Face. You have to be patient sometimes! And careful! Why didn't you listen to me?"

"Oh, I'm stupid and irresponsible, is that what you're saying?" Jay's face was starting to turn a blotchy red. "It's not like we won or anything! How dumb do you think I am, you wet blanket? Did you even ask *why* I didn't come get you before I attacked them?"

"Go on," Cole huffed, arms crossed. "Enlighten me. What could've possibly convinced you that you needed to go it alone against eight highly-armed thieves?"

"SO." Jay started with a dramatic inhale, hands readying up to wave around as he talked. "I heard some weird muttery noises while we were on patrol on our stretch of the road, right? And I go, heyy, that's weird, hasn't it been boring and quiet? It's been crickets all night! And I wait for them to show up so I can go tell you, *like we planned*, but then they don't ever show up!

So I get bored and decide to investigate."

So far, sounded familiar. Cole shifted his weight against the wall he was leaning on.

"Then I hide in the bushes and watch them, and at first it's all normal. Sitting around the fire and laughing about how evil they are, you know." A flippant wave of the hand. "Normal robber business. I was gonna come get you, because there's no way I feel like duking it out with that many punks, right? No way, José, noooo thank you, I like not being diced up. But then they grab this random girl who's just standing there and they put a machete to her neck!"

Now Cole's eyes widened. "Oh."

He hadn't heard this part before.

"So now, obviously, I can't just run away, they're gonna–" Jay cut across his throat with his thumb and makes a sharp noise with his tongue. "And I don't feel too great about turning away from that. So I jump in and take nunchucks to one of their tents, and then I kneecap the nearest guy. Can't escape a fight after that if I want them to leave her alone, so I keep knocking stuff over and yelling as many hilarious zingers as I can think of, 'cuz I hoped you'd hear me. And you did!" Jay flashes him a smug grin. "So. *You're welcome.*"

"I …" Cole had to take a moment to blink. "Thanks. For getting her out of there."

"See, was that so hard? I did something responsible after all, *mom*."

"You never mentioned that part." He was just going to ignore the 'mom' bit. "That makes it different."

"How could I mention it? You kept going all mad mama hen on me because you thought I did it on purpose."

"In all fairness. You very much did stray from the plan on purpose."

"But I'm forgiven?"

Cole shoved his face into a splayed palm and sighed.

"Yep."

Jay fist-pumped.

"And you know what I think?" The other ninja ran skinny fingers through scruffy brown hair, paused, and then punched Cole's shoulder playfully. "You need to relax. You guys are always so serious! Zane never gets a joke, and you're always stressing out about plans and being the leader. Dude, it stresses *me* out, and I'm not even leading!"

"Easy for you to say," Cole muttered, rubbing his shoulder. "It's not your fault if anything goes wrong."

It was Jay's turn to sigh. "Okay, but hear me out: maybe stressing out about being leader all the time and having super detailed plans that can't change ever … isn't good for missions?"

"Sounds fake."

"Sounds FAKE–look, I'm just saying. If you always get all up in your head about stuff, you're gonna be too stressed to do missions. Weren't you the one saying to always focus on what's happening in the moment?"

"Yes, but–"

"Ah ah ah. Me talky. I didn't follow the plan exactly how you wanted, sure, but it turned out okay! We're fine. Just because we got a little scratched up doesn't mean I'm never responsible and that you suck at leading. Why doncha try trusting me more?" Jay pouted, immediately banishing the vaguely sensible air he'd briefly worn. "I'm not stupid, you know."

That was a solid point, as much as Cole didn't want to admit it. He turned it around in his head quietly, feeling Jay's gaze on him.

"I'll think about it. But right now, I'm gonna get a snack. Last night took it out of me."

"Sounds good," Jay snorted, getting up as well. "I'll be playing video games. I have a new score to make."

"You'll still be trying to beat Zane's score when you're 50," Cole called after him, snickering at the indignant "hey!" he got in response.

"And …"

Jay stopped at the doorway, short of leaving the room.

"That was some pretty good thinking on-the-fly, making sure the innocent escapes and making a commotion so I'd notice. Plus your form's a lot tighter, more confident. Nice work."

His friend's freckled face erupted into a beaming grin.

"So … does this mean I was cool?"

"Don't kid yourself."

Cole laughed as Jay turned around and stormed to the TV, and turned to the kitchen with a faint smile.

He could be silly, irresponsible, and petty … but maybe Jay wasn't so bad after all.

The air was crisp, cool, the clouds trailing through the sky in thick, cottony puffs. The sun painted their edges in watery golden hues, pale light illuminating the wooden planks of the Destiny's Bounty as it flew onwards. Indigo bled into the celestial expanse, promising night in the coming hours. The ninja had retreated for the night to recharge as they saw fit. Cole leaned on the ship's railing, letting the breeze tug his hair wild and chill his barren arms.

Shintaro was saved. The Skull Sorcerer was no more a threat to the underground civilizations so long plagued by his presence. And …

His heart ached remembering the golden locket left behind with Gleck, a memory needed more by the Geckle than him but missed sorely regardless. Who knew his mother had painted such vibrant strokes of Shintaro's history?

For so long, her loss had haunted him. It had followed him when he was alone, locked his heart, clung to him like soil clung to hands and fueled his insecurities. And finally, now, he was at peace with her legacy. Lilly Brookstone, master of earth, had fought valiantly against tyranny, injustice, and evil as long as she had lived. He was her son, left behind to carry on in her stead, his way, with her memory in his heart to give him strength. While the hole she left would always hurt … he was okay now. Cole had left Shintaro feeling like he had a piece of her.

The sound of a door sliding open broke him from his thoughts. Turning around found him facing Jay, who was walking up with … an ice pack and rolled-up compression bandage. That was odd; Jay'd already had his wounds dressed earlier.

The twilight gold scattered across brown curls and lit up Jay's deep eyes, their bright, dynamic spark tempered by the same tiredness Cole recognized in his bones, the world-weary caution that came with putting their necks on the line to save the world time and again. His best friend took light steps up to the railing, settling close enough next to him that Cole felt his body heat.

"What's up?" A friendly elbow to the arm, before the ice pack was unceremoniously plopped onto Cole's left wrist. "Thought you'd be needing this."

"Huh-wha–"

"And don't try to argue, either." Jay's voice was playful as ever, with a firm undercurrent cutting through it. "I saw the face you made when you put your plate away at dinner. By the way, absolute miracle your teeth haven't rotted out yet. You only left me one slice of cake."

Before Cole could open his mouth and claim it was just a little soreness from battle, a subtle movement of the hand sent a sharp twinge shooting through his wrist. He couldn't bite the pained hiss quickly enough. Jay, blast his sharp senses, sent him a pointedly knowing look.

There was no refusing the help now. Sighing, he pressed the ice onto his wrist, noting to himself that it was a miracle it hadn't swollen up.

"Since when are you so perceptive?"

Jay snorted. "Wouldn't you like to know."

"I mean, yeah, that's why I asked."

"Smart aleck."

"Cute, coming from you, master of bad comebacks and battle cries."

"Watch out." Jay pointed a finger at his chest. "I'll put ice in your bed."

"I'd like to see you try. I'd snap your spine like a twig."

There was a beat of silence before they burst into laughter.

"A twig, huh?" Jay wiped a tear from his eye. "Haven't heard that one in a while."

"Yeah, well, never too late to bring back an old goldie." Cole smirked down at the blue ninja. "Not like it stopped being true."

The conversation lulled. Jay eyed him for a moment before pulling at the bandage and gently grabbing Cole's hand. Surprised by the uncharacteristic directness, Cole let him. The cloth wrapped around his wrist, then his thumb, before crossing back down and securing his wrist further. The hands wrapping the bandage were nimble and steady, sure in themselves, careful and experienced from treating injury after another. Cole wordlessly watched Jay pour his care into the gesture, and swelled with a quiet pride.

His friend was no longer the wimpy, immature kid he had been when they'd met, an eternity ago. He had grown so much.

They both had.

"A Dozen Little Ways"

Fizzysugarwater

Maybe it started at the monastery.

Maybe it started when that short, freckled, motormouth, jack-of-all-trades inventor showed up at the request of Master Wu, and talked Cole's ear off that whole evening about whatever the hell was on his strange, beautiful mind. How vibrant he seemed, but at the same time occasionally sheepish, apologizing for talking too much in the same breath as fervently explaining the time he got the slit in his eyebrow. How he felt like a bolt of lightning within Cole, suddenly striking him with all sorts of feelings he hadn't had a chance to process yet before Jay's rambling went off again in another direction, and Cole was left to simply follow along. Dumbfounded. Enamored.

Or, maybe it was their first Spinjitzu, in the earthen caves.

Maybe it was Jay's energized, entranced look as he smacked around a couple bone-head infantry with a flourish. How the blue light from his movement danced across his freckled face, illuminating his expression in the dim caves. How he cracked an exhilarating smile at Cole after the twister fizzled out and the bones were in a pile, and it kind of felt like that bolt hit Cole again. A fleeting feeling of wanting to bask in that smile for as long as possible. Maybe it was far later. Maybe it was in space. But not the big moments, like getting retrieved from floating out into the vacuum. Not the big moments.

Maybe it was watching Jay's burning determination to fix this damn shuttle, to get home, to save Ninjago again. How they all seemed to work in perfect sync to make this thing work. How Jay was willing to put everything on the line to get them all home, even with how furious he was with Cole over whatever was happening with Nya. Even with all that, Jay could still stand him.

Maybe it was the tournament.

Maybe it was Jay pouring his heart out to him in the arena, about how worried he was to lose Cole, as a friend, as someone who he really did care a lot about. More than the girl Cole thought he'd been thinking of for the longest time. How the lightning inside Cole's heart refused to give in, and how all the feelings came rushing back at once, even as they fought alongside each other. How Jay was ready, not just willing, to sacrifice his own powers if it meant Cole moved on. How Cole didn't let that happen, because his little lightning bolt needed this win more than he did. How that trust stood strong, stronger than any mountain. How they *cared* for each other.

Maybe it was after Yang's temple.

Maybe it was that fleeting moment passing each other in the Bounty's quiet hall, and Jay looking at Cole for a long moment before bursting into tears suddenly. How he cried about what this meant for them both, about feelings he couldn't begin to understand, about how the fear of *losing* Cole felt closer than ever before. How more than anything Cole just wanted to hold him, to tell him that he's not going anywhere, to be there… but couldn't. How the pit in his stomach twisted as he realized that he maybe couldn't hold Jay ever again. How terrible that felt.

Maybe it was after Yang's temple, again.

Maybe it was the crazy relief in Jay's eyes when he saw him, in the flesh, after they'd all been sure that would never happen again. How Jay didn't hesitate before throwing himself at Cole, laughing and crying and gripping at Cole's gi like if he let go Cole would vanish all over again. And Cole wasn't going to vanish, not now, not ever. He never wanted to let go of Jay. Hell, he barely wanted to let go that whole entire morning. Not once.

Maybe it wasn't so serious. Maybe it was softer than that. Simpler. Goofier.

Maybe it was playing with the timeblades. Even if they knew they shouldn't. Even if they were dangerous and important artifacts. How Cole didn't even mind, didn't even worry. Because Jay had this sort of crackling laugh that came up whenever they did something stupid together, and if Cole could bottle the happy lightning that sparked in his heart he would. How Jay's laugh spoke to him, in an untold language he never thought he could learn.

Maybe it was after Wu disappeared into time.

Maybe it was Jay's decision, despite his hatred of cold weather and extensive mountain-climbing, to accompany Cole on his little expedition to find Wu. To stick with him. To stand by him, when for all the world Cole felt really, really lost. How a week's journey turned into a month's… turned into a year's. And still Jay stayed next to him. The lightning inside, the bolt, whatever it was that Jay seemed to stir up whenever he cracked a joke or cackled like an idiot or said something so kind and so genuine that it melted Cole's heart. It had grown so strong over the years, it was practically boiling over.

How Cole almost kissed him, the night they were snowed in on the mountain, in that little cabin. It was just the pair of them, stuck together through a cold night, and the opportunity to act on that lightning within him came around again and again. But Cole didn't take it. He wasn't sure how to move forward like that, with him.

Maybe it was in the First Realm. When things were definitely at their worst. And yet somehow Jay made it better, always better, even with something small.

Maybe it was the glint in Jay's eyes, getting the idea to build a makeshift Firstbourne to distract the hunters so they could escape. The glint that was ever-present when his mind was running. That excitement. That ingenuity. That way that Jay made everything fill with hope the moment he started spitballing an idea. Even if it didn't solve all their problems, Cole found himself feeling so much lighter once they'd made that breakthrough. And that was thanks to Jay.

Maybe it was during the invasion. During the fall. A fall that would never really leave Cole, even after all this time.

How frantic and terrified Jay had looked, yelling down at Cole in horror. How everything seemed to sink in slow motion, how the lightning in Cole's chest twisted and arced and tried desperately to reach up to the person who'd put it there as Cole's body plummeted away from him. How once he'd landed, there were only a few things keeping him going, and Jay was one of them. He had to get back to him, he wasn't going to die down here without ever saying something to Jay in his life. He had to. So he kept going, even as the fog was closing in. He kept going through the armies, through the Tornado of Creation, through the brief respite that was collapsing into a cot and taking a night's rest. A much-needed safe night's rest.

Maybe it was all of these little things, these little ways Cole found himself falling in love with Jay Goddamn Walker, that led to here. Led to now.

Led to standing outside Jay's room in the wee hours of the morning, not being able to sleep until he put everything on the table. Until he opened his heart properly to Jay, because that's what he deserved.

Tentatively, and with a deep, preparatory breath, Cole pushed the door open. A sharp gasp alerted him that Jay was awake too, and for a brief second they were both staring wide-eyed at each other, Jay sitting upright on his bed and Cole at the door. Then Jay cracked a nervous but oh-so-sweet smile, one that made the lightning in Cole's chest spark up suddenly.

"Hey there," Jay said into the darkness, smiling up at Cole. He shifted around so he was facing Cole. "Couldn't sleep?"

"Ah, not really… lotta stuff on my mind," Cole answered shortly, running his hands through his hair. It certainly wasn't a lie, that his mind had been spinning, trying to come up with a decent, clear way to admit everything to the boy sitting innocently in front of him. His best friend. Jay tilted his head and sort of nodded, glancing away.

"Same here, same here. You…" he started to say, glancing down at the space on his bed. Then he scooted over slightly and patted the spot next to him. "You wanna talk about it? Or just… yknow, be here?"

Cole's shoulders softened, some of the tension dropping away at Jay's invitation. An invitation to talk about it. Precisely what he needed. He nodded, slightly, and took slow strides to Jay's side, settling down on the bed next to him and drawing a knee up to his chest, sighing. Jay's head tilted again, and he studied Cole for a beat. Cole glanced at him again, then away, before speaking up.

"There is something I'd like to talk about. To you, I mean, er…"

"Oh?" Jay interjected quietly, adjusting his sitting position to better face Cole. Cole glanced at him again, and he had such a cute, curious look on his face that Cole couldn't help the twitch of his lips into a relaxed sort of smile, which was met by a surprised grin from Jay. He leaned on his hand and welcomed Cole's next words. "Well, I'm all ears! Don't hold back on my account, rockcandy."

"... thanks," Cole responded after a second, realizing he'd been admiring Jay for a moment too long. He looked away, back into the middle distance. The cold caught him and he shivered.

"Look, I… don't freak out when I tell you all this, right now. I know it seems kinda sudden, and it seems like a bit much to bring it all out here, now, after… yknow. Nearly dying several times." He ran a hand through his hair again. He felt silly.

Jay had straightened up after the "don't freak out" warning, but there was still a quip on his tongue. "Well, nearly dying several times happens to us any given day, I wouldn't sweat it." He snickered. Cole snorted shortly, reveling in Jay's laughter and how fantastic it was. Once Jay stopped, he did glance up again. "So… what is it, then?"

Cole bit his lip. "Yeah, it… see, the fact that it all came at such a close call this time around, that's kinda what prompted me to say any of this in the first place. Because I… I guess I'm scared? It all came so close today, e-especially after I… fell." Cole swallowed hard, the memories bubbling up despite his desire to shove them down again. He sighed again, heavily. Jay next to him had faltered his smile, then shimmied closer to Cole and tentatively wrapped his arm around Cole's shoulders, pulling them together softly. Cole felt his breath hitch a little, realizing a sob was still somewhere in his throat. He swallowed harshly again, leaning into Jay's side-hug and attempting to regain himself. He couldn't break down in the middle of this, not now.

"Hey, it's… it's alright. You're here now, that's what matters, Cole," Jay murmured softly, rubbing the shoulder he was holding. "That's what matters." Cole nodded. Of course, Jay was right about all this. Still. He needed to speak out. So he took a deep breath and tried not to mince words.

"Jay, I need to tell you this right now, even if everything's okay right now, it just… things could change and I couldn't live with myself if I never told you, because it's important, it's really important, at least to me. It's been so long that I'm actually… well, sure of it now, which is why I'm telling you as I'm sure of it. Instead of when it may have started. And it's why I need to tell you now, more than ever." His hand sort of slid quietly to find Jay's, looking for some sort of lifeline. Cole knew he was going overboard, he wasn't speaking clearly, he was just babbling on. He felt silly, edging around the issue like this.

Then Jay squeezed his hand, and Cole looked at him again, gazing into sweet green eyes and seeing a surprisingly flushed face, but one with an expression of delighted surprise, like he'd caught on to the subject already. He leaned over towards Cole just slightly, and Cole leaned just slightly back, flushing brilliantly. That incited a smirk from Jay, and another little tilt of his head.

"Then tell me already," Jay whispered. "Ya big goof. And you say I talk too much."

In a moment, Cole's worried, tentative feelings fell away. A sort of surprised, relieved grin spread on his face, and he almost laughed, because this was going so much better than he'd ever expected. He looked at the floor, smile turning sort of shy, then met Jay's eyes again, warm and open.

"I… I love you, Jay. I love you a lot. And I was kinda scared to tell you, up till now." Jay's grin turned just… absolutely dazzling. Cole almost squinted in it, still smiling.

"Well I am very glad you did, Brookstone. Because I love you *exceptionally,*" Jay crowed in such a goofy voice that Cole snorted, tucking his head forward. His arm snaked around Jay's side and the other hand - still in Jay's - held it up, like they were waltzing or something, but they were just sitting. Flush against each other. It was impossibly comfortable to be with him like this. To be with him *period*. Jay cackled quietly, before adding "And I've been loving you for, heh… quite a while, if I'm being frank. You beat me to the punch!"

Tears sort of pricked at Cole's eyes and he let out a funny kind of squeak and hugged Jay tightly. He hadn't expected this to go so well. "You're such a dork, master's sake I love you so much!" He buried his head in Jay's shoulder, feeling almost overwhelmed by all this. It was all so strangely perfect. Jay laughed again, and the lightning in Cole's heart arced out, finally freed by this clumsy, fantastic confession. Jay *loved* him. And he loved Jay.

Maybe this would be where it started. For the both of them.

SPEEDYTHECAT 2020

Limoneutro

JAY
Artzy
Why so
BLUE
JAYCORE

"Always Worth It"

Riftid Fox

Running, each step more agile than the last one, the cold wind colliding with his skin, each breath filling his lungs with adrenaline, his surroundings just a blur for his sight. He could feel the erratic powers inside himself, the element unstable in his veins, the flashes of lights that were the bright signs of the early establishments turning into nothing with each rapid step. One in front of another, jumping around, sliding downwards when the obstacles were to high for him to jump over. The gaps for each rooftop to the other never present, he could feel when his feet impulse only became stronger when he landed in the next platform, and if the fall was imminent, a short burst of green fire could make the trick. His hands were numb due to the cold of the morning. His breath were just puffs of white that disappeared almost as rapidly as they formed. His momentum going out for a few seconds, but his powers made compensation for that type of mistakes.

He could remember how it all started, him, being nothing but an ungrateful brat, who only wanted to make his father proud, to see him just one more time, to know who he was and what was his destiny. He escape from that place, believing that he was best alone (he wasn't evil... He never was... Not consciously). He began stealing, of at least, trying to. He was just eight, with two years of almost not eating anything under his belt (he always wondered why he wasn't that hungry... Now he knew, and he hate it. His steps became more rapid) and then, he found them or... They found him, blurs of black, red, blue and white. Of pranks and trickery, blurs of a forgotten dream, a desire. He resisted, and he took hours to come down from that stupid roof, he fell down (why didn't that resulted painful? His face contorted in a frown, he jumped, some blasts of green sparks and continued running) he tried to prove them wrong, or... Was he lying to himself? He never knew, but now he had an army at his command, and Skales ruined everything. He went for the Fangpyres, the same mistake, and finally, he found the last Anacondrai, Pythor, seeing him as a friend... He used him. (The scowl deepen, his heart becoming even more erratic, jump, slide, run) he then became part of a family that he thought (and knew) didn't want him there. Then, in a show of vulnerability, he became a prisoner. He still survived, he was still welcomed. He finally saw him, his father (He knew those were tears, but he pushed harder). And not even a day later, he was... Gone. Only because he was this 'Green Ninja', a 'savior'.

The problems started not soon after.

Obnoxious training, then fighting, then giving up his childhood for people he didn't liked, and his (he never thought of that woman as his mother, she wasn't and didn't deserve that title) mother came around, more fighting, then a broken leg. He still faced his father. He still save him. And he finally had a family... Or so he thought.

His friends never received a 'thank you for teaching the Green Ninja all that he knows' rewards. He barely had time to see his father and (Don't think about it, just run) mother anymore. Then Zane's father, the incredible and intelligent Dr. Julien, was... Gone, and not soon after, the Nindroids came around, he was drained of power due to his own past mistake, and then… Zane paid the price due to his leader's own recklessness, due of not making sure that, that Thing was completely destroyed. His family broke apart. He still hold together what was left of it, his sister, his... Mother, his father and his... Uncle. Some friends here and there, he hold it, for them. He called them back, brought a solution, they refused (he huffed, his feet moving faster than before, don't break...). Soon, Chen came around, and used them, and Skylor, and the rest of the Elemental Masters as well, turning everyone against each other. His own father followed Zane's, but his robotic friend was back (even if Kai try to... Don't think about it, run). His... Misako then betrayed his father with Wu, he smiled (he hate her, so much). Also selling the last piece of Sensei's Garmadon Legacy, besides himself. Wu's mistake soon appeared (he actually believe that, if Morro wasn't that... Far gone, he would like the guy, a brother or cousin, perhaps), he almost went away, because he was no strong enough. He saw himself hurting the people that now loved him (Lies, he knew, but keep himself quiet. The bits of sweat rolling down his skin, it was cold, making him flinch since his temperature was high). He could see what happened to Cole due to his carelessness. (But he keep running, even if he scraped his knees, and some small spots of red formed in his green pants. It was his fault). The good thing about that whole ordeal was that Nya discovered she had Elemental Powers and that... He saw his father one last time (that Beast was not his father, run, jump, scratch, flinch, ignore, run). Afterwards, he just remembered glimpses of... Orange mist, and magic and green crystals. He did his best to ignore that nightmare, of his sister not moving in Jay's arms... (Shake head, jump, burst of Earth, landing and continuing running), then Kai and Nya found Ray and Maya, their parents, and he was happy (he knew dept inside that he was so jealous of them, of the happy family of four) for them. Wu went missing and Misako forgot about him for that old man (That old Fool took more attention and love than her own son. He gasped, almost falling if it wasn't for the burst of green ice that make him slide and help him get back in his track. Ignore, run). Zane then took the hit once more, an old repressed memory containing the evil Overlord computer virus, or the Digital OverLord, destroying him from the inside out. Taking control of the Ice Master's body and almost destroying Nya. But they prevail and succeed at the end (He knew that Zane was lying, but he keep his mouth shut. He grunted, pushing himself harder). He searched his… Sensei (that man was far away from that title, he didn't deserve it, not at all!) to make Misako proud, but… Harumi happened. She was so gorgeous and a traitor to his broken heart. She used him, and he fell for it. During that mission, before they found out about her true intentions, he discovered what he really was, part Darkness and part Light. He was balancing himself in a tightrope, almost falling to each side every once in a while.

The whole city trembled, the Colossus making his way trying to destroy them. He almost... Lost his family, he actually thought that they were gone. Jay, Kai, Zane and Cole... Gone... (He pressed himself harder, jumped and leaped, green tinted water escaping his fingertips and then landing, running again). And he was powerless, his sister and P. I. X. A. L. Doing everything in their power to help him escape of the Princess's rage and hatred, but he knew that he had forgiven Rumi, (he forgive her but didn't forgot what she had done, the pain she caused, not to others or himself, but to herself too). That Beast taking the name of his father, warning him. Of what, has yet to come. When Ninjago was once again in their feet, The Darkness arose, he could feel his lungs screaming for oxygen when he followed Garmadon down there, but was okay because he was part of the enemies. He ignored it. Because, at the end, they won, even if he himself had given up at the end, even if he didn't want to wake up, he came back. For them. For the closest thing he could call 'family'. And then...

He came to a halt, sliding, almost falling face first from a long way, he stood and observed each one of the faces of the civilians under his feet, smiling, not worrying about a tomorrow because they knew that even if their saviors were kids, they were heroes. Who keep them safe, each and every time again. His chest was raising and falling with difficulty, his checks probably slightly red because of the exhaustion, his eyes blinking with desperation due to the salty drops falling from them, blurring his vision. But the sun was awakening, revealing the happiness of still being alive. He saw how the kid they meet at the hospital, Nelson, rode his purple bike with the news in a basket behind his seat. He was smiling. He was okay, alive.

Safe.

Lloyd could only smile at the arouse of another day with Ninjago still in one piece. And he remembered, that even if he wasn't okay. This, this was what he was fighting for. He was young, and maybe a klutz, and still not able of growing up. He didn't mind, his energized green orbs continued to see how much Ninjago had grown from past pains. He smiled, even if slightly visible fangs were there, and the tint of red in his eyes, with slits instead of pupils, Darkness trying to take hold of his own heart and his very soul. He smiled.

This was worth all the sleepless nights, all the sore muscles after each battle, all nights and even days spend in the infirmary, checking over themselves and others. All the lousy shouts against them. Because this was his family. His home.

And he didn't care if Misako and Wu betrayed his father, and he didn't mind Harumi bringing back Lord Garmadon, and he didn't mind Morro antics, or even Kai's attempt to destroy him that one time. His smile grew bigger, and with a last sigh, he continued running, his green figure growing as a shadow above the heads of the Innocents. Some people looking up with annoyance, others, with angry scowls, or even smiles. But they knew deep inside, no matter what they own reactions were, that the Ninjas were there to protect them from all types of danger. Time and time again. They knew. Even after property damage, and rogue power surges, and unhappy, fearful and annoyed people. They knew.

Their smiles not being noticed by the retreating form of the Energy Master, the youngest of all of the Ninja, because they all knew...

That at the end, It was always worth it.

Our past does not define us

Missing Board 2:
The Thickening Plot!

Home-school?
is his real name Jole?
Retired?

One thing ALL have in common: INTERACTED WITH NINJA.

whistle

ROBOACHOR 3000

ICECREAM(?)

NO-EYED PETE

ZANE(?)

Thanks for the boat, Do- you're the best!

LOU BLACKSNO

Noodle house behind the snakes??

Slippery Snake!

PYTHOR P.

TAI-D

PATTY KEYS

RAY+MAYA

Thankyou for the picture. I have a great vacation!

BOLOBO

RONIN

He travels far, he may be in lower Ninjago!

MISAKO

RUFUS

"Home for the Night"

Sibilla

Dareth let out a long sigh as he shoved the last table into place. He wasn't sure if it was a blessing or a curse that he didn't have any chairs to flip over. Most of them had been broken by the Sons of Garmadon ages ago and any that survived sure didn't last until tonight.

The bar was a wreck, in simple terms. Between the bikers, Garmadon laying siege to the city, and the victory party, hardly anything was left in the right place. Most of the drinks were missing, glasses were broken—although swept up—and most of the decorations were either gone or on the floor. Dareth only took the time to get anything hazardous out of the way when plenty of people wanted to use his bar to party, including the ninja. At least the jukebox and the karaoke machine were still functional.

Speaking of which, he needed to unplug those. Dareth headed for the jukebox, only to hear the door squeak when it opened.

"Oh, sorry." Dareth turned. "But we're—" His words were lost when he saw who it was.

Ronin stood there, one hand fiddling with his hat as if it refused to sit right on his head. With his other hand on his hip he tried to look confident, but his smile was shy.

"Hey." Ronin said.

Dareth sprinted across the now open floor. He tackled Ronin into a hug. His friend stumbled back, but didn't try to wriggle free. In fact he laughed, putting a hand on Dareth's shoulder.

"Didn't think you'd be that happy to see me."

"What does that mean?" Dareth glared when he pulled away. "I haven't seen you in almost a year. You dip the city to go do more work and the next time I see you was when you got arrested on TV."

"Yeah…" Ronin tried to smile as he scratched his cheek. "Not one of my finer moments, for sure. Figured the ninja would need help in this mess but uh, that didn't work out."

Dareth wanted to tighten his grip, but forced himself to let go instead. "Speaking of which, why weren't you here for the party?"

"Eh, not really my thing." Ronin shrugged. "Figured it'd be easier to catch up this way anyway. Not here too late, am I?"

Dareth shook his head. In spite of his exhaustion he'd take any chance he'd get to talk to Ronin. He looked around the dining room, finally picking a small table next to the window. It was the right size, but it needed some seats.

"Hang on." Dareth said before he scrambled around the bar. He managed to find one stool behind it—that he often used to get to high shelves—and one of the chairs stuck in the corner. He dragged both of them over to the table.

Ronin frowned at the empty glass shelves. "Don't have anything to drink, do you?"

"Uh, alcohol wise? No." Dareth chuckled. "But let me see if I can't find something."

The bar yielded no results—unless they wanted to split a carton of milk that Dareth was pretty sure had expired. He headed to the kitchen instead. There were at least a few liters of soda left. Either the party-goers hadn't found them, or they had enough to drink.

Dareth brought one bottle out and grabbed a couple of whisky glasses.

"Oh wow, the fancy stuff." Ronin joked.

"Of course." Dareth made a show of pouring the soda into the glasses before closing the bottle again. He stared at it, squinting really hard. He looked at the date underneath the company's name. "Wow, vintage, 1943."

Ronin laughed out loud at that.

Dareth just smirked at his own joke as he pulled out the chair before taking a seat on the stool. "So, what have you been up to over the past year?"

"Hah, where do I start?" Ronin sat down in the chair before scooting it closer to the table. "Been all over, to be honest. Wherever the money leads me." He picked up the soda and swirled it around before taking a sip. "Went back to Stiix for a time, now that it's fully rebuilt, selling what I could. After that I took a quick trip to Limon to see what items they'd picked up from beetle hunting…"

Dareth didn't exactly mean to zone out from what Ronin was saying, but the words became lost the more he studied his face. He didn't actually look much different, but something about him seemed more confident. Dareth was pretty sure it all started after he escaped that deal with that ghost. Taking that trip must have done him some good.

"Things almost got hairy in Micaville." Ronin tapped the edge of his glass. "I may have tried to steal some gemstones. Shop lady was not happy."

Dareth snorted. "What, did she beat you up?"

"Almost." Ronin laughed. "I surrendered the merch. I think I foolishly forgot how unbelievably strong everyone is down there."

Dareth narrowed his eyes. "Can't help but notice that bit of red on your cheeks there, Ronin."

"Hah, what?" Ronin blinked. "Nah, nah—"

“It is not.” Ronin’s blush was worse now. “I mean, she was something but uh, I’m not really into girls like that.”

Ah, now Dareth could feel his own cheeks warming up. He decided to ignore it, taking a drink. “So, how were you the one who got sent to jail?”

Ronin scoffed and finished off the rest of his soda before grabbing the bottle. “Don’t ask me. I think you stole all of my good luck.”

Dareth cringed. “I wouldn’t really call it that.”

“You didn’t get arrested.”

“Nah, instead some crazy old tea lady cursed me and the master of metal beat the crap out of me in the ring just to teach Lloyd some lesson.”

Ronin frowned. “What lesson?”

“No idea.” Dareth groaned. “I always told myself I’d be there to help them but I’m starting to wonder if it’d be better if I did my own thing.”

Ronin nodded. “Think that might be a good idea.”

“I mean, I’d still help them if they ask but…” Dareth sighed. “Just look at this place. It’s going to take me months to get it fixed up and restocked.”

“Well, I wouldn’t mind lending a hand.” Ronin tapped on the rim of his glass once more. “But um… I will be leaving again, at some point.”

Dareth’s heart stuttered. “Huh? But you just got here.”

“Yeah, but I can’t stay. I came back because of the invasion. There’s still a lot going on.”

He tried to ignore how crushed he felt. Ultimately, it was Ronin’s life and his decision. He didn’t have the right to beg him to stay. “At least tell me you’ll be around for a little while.”

Ronin sighed. “I might, but where am I going to stay? I sold my shop and my apartment ages ago.”

Dareth shrugged. “Then stay here.”

He didn’t really catch the implications of that until it had already left his mouth. It wasn’t that odd though, was it? They were friends. Dareth had a spare room upstairs. Still, Dareth could see Ronin’s cheeks going red again as his friend kept his gaze focused on the window.

“S-sorry.” Dareth muttered. “You don’t have to, just thought I’d—”

“It’s fine.” Ronin cut him off. “If it doesn’t bother you, I mean…”

“Of course it doesn’t. We’re, um… we’re friends, right?” He kept fiddling with his glass, not really drinking anymore of it. The sugar would only make him more nervous.

There was a brief silence. Ronin eventually nudged his hat back up and finished off another glass of soda before sliding it away. They hadn’t even gotten through half the bottle, but that was probably just as well.

Dareth had his gaze fixed nowhere in particular. “You tired?”

“Nah, not really.”

He hummed, thinking. “Me either.” Then, he smiled, scooting the stool back as he stood. “I’ve got an idea.”

He didn’t wait for Ronin to reply as he dashed over to the karaoke machine. He flicked through a few songs before settling on one. The trumpets blasted out of the speakers as he ran back to the table.

“Oh no.” Ronin said when he realized he was being dragged. “No, no, I am not singing.”

“Come on, Ronin, I’m singing too.”

“Yeah, but you’re good at it.”

“Hah, thanks, but this is about having fun. Come on.” Dareth dragged Ronin all the way onto the stage before he snatched up the microphone.

“How lucky can one guy be?” He began to sing. “I kissed him and he kissed me. Like the fella once said, ain’t that a kick in the head.”

He gestured to Ronin, but the man just shook his head. Dareth responded by leaning closer as he continued. “The room was completely black. I hugged him and he hugged back. Like the sailor said quote, ain’t that a hole in the boat?”

Ronin laughed and finally took the microphone with one hand while he joined in.

My head keeps spinning.
I go to sleep and keep grinning.
If this is just the beginning
My life is gonna be beautiful.

Sulivan
2020

THE LEGO
NINJAGO
SEISHI

VITA RUSH
VITA RUSH

Visit Twonix City

Twonix City is an independent city state within Ninjago City, that was built around a giant lemon left by the First Spinjitzu Master. Here are the Top 10 sights for visitors to the city!

Owlman's Owls

souvenirs & memorabilia

Discover true wisdom through the acquisition of antiques and eye glasses. This store has a comprehensive collection of owl-related memorabilia, and it's all available to purchase! Beware of nocturnal opening hours!

Address: 2-4047 Nostalgic Market
Note: Try *Owlman's Binoculowls* for a close-up of the Twonix Star Drill!

Doctor Bones' Chiropractor

chiropractic clinic

Doctor Bones has run this chiropractic clinic for over 100 hundred years! Some say they weren't a skeleton when they began... even Doctor Bones can't remember what they originally looked like!

Address: 1-95 High Seas Shelter
Note: Look after your skeletons!

TOP TIP! Take photos with Doctor Bones' life-size plastic skeleton! Please leave a coin in the mug!

Pet Rock Shop

stone gifts

For some down to earth companionship, try the Pet Rock Shop! Hand-carved friends freshly cut from foundational bedrock are in stock now!

Address: 1-25 Sedimentary Walk
Note: Stone is better.

Mr. Croak's Frog Café

café

A high fashion café perfect for patrons looking to enjoy the company of all-seeing amphibians, for a premium price of course! Mr. Croak serves teas of all kinds in his ever beloved frog costume!

Address: 3-5826 Royal Heights
Note: Includes over 6 varieties of frogs!

Taco Tunes

taco restaurant

Fine tunes and tacos are sure to be found at Taco Tunes, Twonix City's oldest taco-serving establishment! *"The tacos have every flavour you would want, in a taco!"* - Anonymous

Address: 2-22 Flavour Central
Note: Closed on Tuesdays!

NEW! With the completion of the **VitaRush Juice Reactor**, clean citrus energy is now available as far as the tubes can carry it!

LemonMart

groceries

As the leading lemon importer in Ninjago, LemonMart is a one-stop destination for energizing citrus drinks. A partnership with VitaRush has led this franchise to new heights, with experimental technology being implemented in the Twonix City branch!

Address: 3-420 Big Zest Blvde
Note: LemonMart can neither confirm nor deny any correlation to ferret related activities.

★ WARNING ★

Wild ferrets are attracted by tasty lemons. Wild ferrets bite with lethal intent. **Don't feed** them & **Don't fight** them.

Even if you fight, you can't win. Please allow JUSTICE ENFORCING FREEDOM FIGHTER to do its job. No autographs until after.

Legacy Suits

second hand goods

Those feeling nostalgic for authentic memorabilia of times gone by, should look no further than Legacy Suits! We pride ourselves with 100% accuracy to the beloved televised tales of the Ninja. *Spelling Manters certified!*

Address: 1-09 Spinjitzu Old World Crescent
Note: Ask the shop owner about their thoughts on time travel!

ZNAP Super! Toys

character goods & gadgets

Searching for a gift to surprise a loved one? Discover an amazing abundance of popular action figures, electronic toys and decorated 1x2x5s at this super-brand gift store.

Address: 2-98 Innovation Circuit, Shopping District
Note: Novelty merchandise is so new that it hasn't undergone any product testing yet!

Muchos Ojos

home decor

For the latest in decorative eyeballs, look no further than Muchos Ojos, the creative "brick-box" installation! Everything looks better with eyeballs!

Address: 3-103 New Classic Corner
Note: Carries over 450 products!

Bikes & Wheels

sports & bicycling goods

Rent a colourful bike to explore the streets of Twonix City in style!

Address: 3-85 Wheel Deal Drive
Note: Bikes don't work in the river!

Hey Nya, may I ask you a question?
Yeah, what's up?

We are many kilometres from any large body of water...
so why is it that you are carrying a surfboard?

See Zane, you've failed to account for the fact...

That I am, incredibly cool

Wow this is very gross!
Is my sister surfing on sewage water!?

"Chrysanthemum"

Cia

Garmadon's son has only been on the earth for twenty-four hours, and he's only been Lloyd for nineteen, but he already finds himself terrified of the tiny, living thing he cradles in his arms.

"He's so small," he tells Misako, eyebrows furrowed in concern. "Is he supposed to be this small?"

Misako, who's been answering questions similar to this for the better part of the morning, rolls her eyes. "He's fine, Garmadon. He was born a little early, that's all."

Not as reassured as he should be, Garmadon returns his gaze to his son. He's sleeping now, deathly still in his arms, and he resists the urge to wave a hand over his tiny face, if only to feel the small puffs of breath he knows must be there. He brushes a wisp of hair from his head instead, marveling at how pale it is.

"He's got my father's hair," he murmurs.

"I don't care, Garmadon, we're still not naming him after the man."

It's Garmadon's turn to roll his eyes. "I never said that. I said *Montgomery* was an unacceptable name to burden my son with."

"Oh, *your* son."

He misses the rest of her retort as Lloyd fidgets briefly, tiny features screwing up as he shifts. A flash of lightning from outside brightens the room, and Garmadon pulls Lloyd closer reflexively. The thunder crack follows soon after, and Garmadon flinches, the thick smell of rain filtering through the open windows. He can already see thick droplets sliding down the hydrangeas Misako's growing in the windowsill, drowning the pale flowers. It's been pouring all week, typhoons hitting the coast with gusto as they always do this time of year. Garmadon doesn't like it – his son is much more suited for the sun and all its brightness, not the grey-skied downpour of thunderclouds.

Lloyd hardly reacts to the downpour, having gone still and silent in his arms once again. Garmadon's heartbeat quickens. He shouldn't sleep this much, should he? He doesn't remember Wu being like that, but he was so young when Wu was born, and it was so long ago, and he can't feel for Lloyd's breathing now because the breeze pouring through the window's too strong, and–

A soft hand sets on his shoulder. "Here," Misako sighs, guiding Garmadon's hand to rest gently over Lloyd's chest. "Feel. That's a heart, going strong."

Despite his hesitance, a deep-rooted part of him still desperately afraid his touch might hurt something so small, Garmadon does so. Lloyd's heartbeat is rapid and as fragile as a bird's wing, but undeniably there. A small, living thing.

Something warm curls in his chest, and Garmadon thinks he might understand his father's delight in creation – in things that live.

Not, of course, that his father has ever created anything so perfect as Lloyd, but Garmadon can credit him for having tried.

It's weird, having a dad.

Not the concept of having a dad – Lloyd's bragged enough about being the son of *Lord Garmadon* to at least get that part. But actually having him here, a living, breathing person who looks at Lloyd and cares–

It's weird, that's all. Not that it's a bad weird.

"You need to wrap your hands, before you go hitting things like that," Garmadon scolds gently, twisting gauze around Lloyd's bruised, swollen fingers. "The others can show you how, for training. They should have shown you earlier."

Lloyd bites his lip. He doesn't tell his dad that the bruises are less from training, and more from pointlessly banging on bars in an attempt to get on Pythor's nerves. It sounds silly, compared to the way his dad swept in like a big hero and took out all the snakes in single swipes.

A big hero. Lloyd wonders if the others will ever see him that way, too.
His hand twinges as the gauze pulls tight, and Lloyd sucks in a sharp breath. Garmadon flinches, drawing his hands back.

"I'm sorry," he says, quickly. "I keep forgetting – you're so small."

Lloyd makes a face at that. *Small?* "I'm not that short," he grumbles. "I've grown lots."

"Of course you have," Garmadon amends. "I only–"

His expression twists, and Lloyd's stomach drops. There's that look again.

"I'm sorry," Garmadon repeats, sounding downtrodden.

Lloyd purses his lips. For all his bragging, he's never really thought much about whether he *likes* his family or not. It's hard, when you don't have one around to like. Watching the way his dad worries and his uncle walks around all stone-faced now, Lloyd's not sure he should like it. He likes Uncle Wu, of course, and he loves his dad, but–

He hates the way they all walk around like they're preparing for a funeral. His dad's

funeral, his funeral, whichever it ends up being. It's stupid. Lloyd's lived on the streets for months, and in Darkley's even longer. He wouldn't have minded walking around like he's doomed for misery then.

But now? When he's got people who care, and a family?

Lloyd sets his mouth stubbornly. He doesn't know much about destiny, or the prophecy, but he knows he's not about to lose this. Not when he's come so far, when he's so close to having – to being someone worth having around.

No funerals, Lloyd promises himself. He can see this prophecy through – they both can, the two of them. You have to be alive to be a family, right?

"It's okay," he finally replies. "I'm alright, dad."

And he's gonna stay that way.

When Garmadon had thought about the final battle in the past, he'd expected the darkness. The destruction, the pain.

He hadn't expected to survive.

"So you're really giving up fighting, then?"

Glancing up at Lloyd, taller now yet still small enough to not quite fit his bright golden gi, Garmadon finds survival a very welcome surprise.

"Yes," he says, returning his gaze to the flowerbeds Misako's helped him put in the monastery garden. They're coming along well, despite the recent fits of bad weather, and they do a fine job of making the monastery look homey. Unthreatening.

He hopes, at least.

"I think I've done enough fighting, for my part," he continues. He gives Lloyd a wry look. "I'm not sure Ninjago could take much more of it from me, anyways."

"I dunno," Lloyd says. "It's been getting pretty boring."

Garmadon snorts. "Boring is something you should appreciate, son. Excitement isn't always good."

"No, but it isn't bor–*dull,*" Lloyd mutters, crouching down to study the flowerbeds. Garmadon shakes his head in reply, sighing. He remembers being his son's age once, yearning for the next thrill, even if it feels ages away now.

He's got a whole lecture on *appreciating the quiet moments* on the tip of his tongue, too, when Lloyd speaks up again.

"We used to have these flowers at Darkley's," he says, tilting his head as he studies them. "Some of the boys tore them all up and threw 'em at the window, but they were pretty before that."

Garmadon bites the inside of his cheek, his eyebrows furrowing. His expression softens as he spots the gentle way Lloyd handles the flower, carefully pushing it back to place. It never fails to baffle him how someone as gentle as Lloyd could've come from his beginnings, much less from Garmadon, but he treasures it.

"Snapdragons," Garmadon says, instead. "Fitting flowers, for our family."

Lloyd looks at him curiously, eyes bright with the light of suspicion, and Garmadon is tempted to tell him the full truth, then and there. But Lloyd is still so young, innocent and naive and barely come to terms with his place as the Green Ninja. The truth of their blood is a heavy one, and Garmadon can't find it in himself to lay it on Lloyd's shoulders today. No, his son is happy among humans, so a human he'll let him be. Someday he'll know he's more, closer to the dragons he admires than he realizes, but not quite yet.

Miraculously, Garmadon has the time, now.

"If you stay after dinner, I can show you how they're planted," he offers. Lloyd nods, and Garmadon's smile widens.

Destruction is in his blood, and he'd be blind to say it isn't in Lloyd's as well. Power is power, whether it's bright and beautiful or stained in darkness, and Lloyd could shatter mountains as well as move them, if he wanted.

But Lloyd never moves to pull the flowers up, only watches them rustle slightly in the breeze, leaving them to grow a little bigger, a little brighter. Garmadon, for his part, watches his son, all bright eyes and the burnished gold hair of his grandfather, and reminds himself that one needs not be a master of creation to appreciate life.

Lloyd likes to think of himself as an optimist, for the most part. He's at least good at pretending that he is one, with how many times he's had to convince himself it's worth it to get back up.

Right now, he's trying to remember how he's ever managed to convince himself, because this time, getting back up seems impossible.

Lloyd used to wonder, back during Morro, how far you had to push yourself to break like that. How far someone had to push you, to truly splinter. He thinks he might have found his answer, though his is less of a bitter hatred and more of an empty abyss of hurt.

It hurts to breathe. That would be a sign that something's wrong, if Lloyd didn't already have about sixty other signs that he's in trouble. But the breathing thing is sticking out to him especially, right now. His lungs feel like they're scraping against his ribs every time he tries to draw breathe, bruised and stinging, and there's a deep ache in his chest that grows worse by the minute.

He tries swallowing again, sand scraping down his throat as he does. He hisses out a breath instead of coughing, almost frightened that his lungs will give out completely if he does.

He says almost, because Lloyd isn't sure what emotions he's got left to feel anymore.

A lie. Pain starts numb, sometimes.

Lloyd's chest spasms as he sucks in another breath, and he wishes the desert would swallow him whole. His father – his real father, who pushed him from the Cursed Realm and told him to return to light and living – would want him to stand back up. He'd beg him to, stress the importance of continuing on, of *persevering*. Stuff like that.

But if it wasn't for his father, Lloyd wouldn't have to get back up in the first place. If it wasn't for his father, Lloyd wouldn't be–

His eyes burn, stinging as he squeezes them tightly shut, and he tells himself it's the sand.

Instead, he focuses on the ragged beat of his heart. He only knows it's there because his chest throbs in pain with every pulse, but he latches onto the feeling and holds tight.

Still alive, he tells himself, even as every bit of him sings in agony and his lungs scream at him to stop. He's still alive. His powers aren't answering him but they *will*, he knows they will, he can't disappear like he did with Morro. He can't – he can't leave it, not like this, not with his father – *not like this*. If he can't stop Harumi, if he can't save his father, if he can't do anything else at all, he can at least do *this*.

Stay alive. Stay alive. Stay alive.

He's never realized how long the nights out here are, before.

After everything, the light dies down and the Oni vanish, and Lloyd's heart stops.

It shouldn't be a surprise to Garmadon, who isn't even sure his own heart beats now, but it is.

It's not supposed to stop. There was a promise made, somewhere, to keep it beating.

It restarts before he has the chance to process what that even means, and the swell of relief is so foreign, Garmadon leaves before he even has the chance to ask Lloyd what he'd seen. He thinks to himself, *that will be the end of it*. The end of whatever tentative connection he has with the boy, whatever frayed and tattered threads of something they once had. Better to cut them away for good.

Lloyd's not one to let things die, though. Garmadon should know *that* at least, the boy tells him.

"I know you like repeating yourself," he mutters. "Letting go is different."

"That's not what this is," Lloyd huffs back.

Garmadon rolls his eyes, the two of them drifting aimlessly down the Ninjago City garden paths. It's secluded, the rest of the city still recovering, and Garmadon's grateful for the quiet, even if it is awkward. Building any kind of bridge with the boy is difficult, if only because Lloyd stresses that they're rebuilding a bridge, and Garmadon has no memory of any bridge to begin with.

He's still sifting through jumbled emotions, sorting out what his place in this world was and is supposed to be, but he knows that the word son slips easier from his mouth than daughter ever did, so he figures he's on the right path, at least.

"It's about–" Lloyd pauses, his expression contorting. "It's about surviving, I guess," he grinds out.

Garmadon's mouth curls into a grin. "Really. You were quite…vocal, that it was about more than that."

"It is, it's just–" Lloyd cuts off again, stopping them in a half-ruined section of garden still littered with remnants of concrete. "It's the payoff, you know? Here."

He bends down, brushing dust from a surviving scattering of flowers. He gently touches the edge of a petal, pushing the flower head toward the sun. "See?" he says. "After all that, it's still alive."

Garmadon stares at the delicate edges of the petal, smaller and more fragile than any of the buildings that crumbled beneath his rule. At Lloyd's nod, he stretches his own fingers out toward it, his hand impossibly dark and calloused next to his son's own small one. But he brushes his fingers over the petal edge nonetheless, almost surprised that it doesn't decay beneath his touch. It's soft, he notes, like the fragile skin of a newborn. Odd that it should've survived, out of everything else that perished.

"So it is," he says, carefully. Lloyd says nothing, but there's a ghost of a smile around his lips. They must make an odd sight, the pair of them crouched in the dirt in the recovering garden. There's no use in sitting here and looking at the flower, no explanation Garmadon can offer himself, but he doesn't leave. He can take the moment, he decides, to appreciate what Lloyd is trying to show him.

They too, after all, are still alive.

SPINATUS

VAMRG

Even In Darkness We Have The Choice To Reflect The
·Ninjas-and-Coffee·

"*I am Lloyd Garmadon*"

BionicStars

My name is Lloyd Garmadon. And I'm the Green Ninja.

I was abandoned by my mother when I was young to try to avoid destiny. I grew up idolizing the man that I would one day have to fight. I grew up not as the Green Ninja, but the son of Lord Garmadon.

I've fought for Ninjago, and tried to topple it. Well, as much as a kid could topple it. I let out the Serpentine, and started their war all over again. I tried to fight the ninja, and I unleashed Pythor and set into motion my destiny.

I became the Green Ninja to save Ninjago. I gave up on my dreams of being my father to try to help stop what I'd done. Only to get captured, freed by, and learn that my destiny wasn't to just save Ninjago, but was to fight my father. The father that came back from pure darkness, just when he heard I was in danger.

I fought my father on the Dark Island. We drove each other to extremes, trying to avoid the final battle. I tried to ignore the fight, while my father tried to postpone it. The Overlord manipulated both of us for his own ends, pushing us to fight each other. When it came time to do it, I couldn't do it. I let Ninjago fall to darkness because of my choice, and then became the Ultimate Spinjitzu Master to make up for my mistake.

I had my power taken from me multiple times. I fought the Golden Master when I lost it all, and fought Chen when he thought he had it all. I was possessed by Morro who tried to rip it all away from me again, and then the Time Twins when they tried to take over time itself.

I watched as Ninjago City fell to Harumi, and all that she did to me. She ripped away everything from me. She ripped away my friends, my city, my home and my power. All of it because of a mistake I made. I had to fight my father again, only now without any hope of bringing him back. And even now, I know I can't forget what she did to me.

I've fought and protected Ninjago since then. I've saved the people from threat after threat. I've stopped anyone and anything. I've kept them all safe. I've done it all, because that's who I am. I am Lloyd Garmadon. And I'm the Green Ninja.

...For a long time, I didn't know what that meant. I mean, I always knew what the Green Ninja was. I knew that I was destined to defeat the Dark Lord, who I guess was the Overlord. But, I didn't know who I was outside of that. I didn't know what it meant to be the Green Ninja. For the longest time, all I knew was that everyone told me that was what I was. I was the Green Ninja.

But from the start, I don't think that was it. At first, I just wanted to prove myself as someone. I wanted to make up for my mistakes. I made a lot of them. And when I finally felt like I was on my way to doing something good, I learned what Wu said it meant to be the Green Ninja. That, one day, I'd have to face my father, and… defeat him.

And after that, being the Green Ninja meant so many things. It meant I'd have to defeat him, and then defeat the Overlord. It meant that I would protect Ninjago, that I would do everything I could to save it. It meant I was going to lead my friends into battle, and they would rely on me more than anyone else. It meant that destiny had a plan for me, and I was the only one that didn't seem to know what it meant.

At first, it just seemed to be around my father. He was the one that I was fighting for, fighting against too. He was the one that I had to save, destroy, fight, all of it. He was the one I had to do all of this for. I had to fight him because I was the Green Ninja. But I didn't want to be. I wanted to be a hero. I wanted to be someone who could do what the ninja did for me. But that meant I had to fight him. The harder we tried not to fight, the worse we made. I drove him to the Dark Island because of it. I drove him to the Overlord.

When I defeated the Overlord, I thought that was it. I thought that I was the Green Ninja, and now I was the Ultimate Spinjitzu Master. But that didn't last long. That was taken from me, and I was back to begin the Green Ninja. I had my dad back, and I thought maybe, that was what it meant. I'd rescued my father, and that was what it meant to be the Green Ninja. To save people. But Chen took him from me too. No matter what happens to me, I'm always still the Green Ninja. No matter what gets taken… that's what I still am at the end of the day.

When I fought Morro, all he wanted to know was why I was the Green Ninja. He wanted to know why I was chosen and he wasn't. He wanted it more than I did. I never asked to be the Green Ninja, but destiny chose me for some reason. Destiny wanted me to be the Green Ninja. When Morro was inside my head, that's what he wanted to know. He wanted to know why I was the Green Ninja, and he wasn't. He made me think about why I deserved to be the Green Ninja. I know why I was chosen, to fulfill destiny. But he made me think about why I should be the Green Ninja. Why I should be the one protecting the city. For a long time, I thought after that I knew exactly what it meant to be the Green Ninja.

And then Harumi came along. For the first time, someone was taking me down as Lloyd. She didn't care that I was the Green Ninja. She wanted to hurt me. She took away what I valued the most as Lloyd: my father. Even if she hadn't been trying to take down the Green Ninja, she came closer than anyone. She stripped me of my power, my city, my friends, and my father. Everything that the Green Ninja had meant to be, really, was all gone. And I had to just figure out how I was even still the Green Ninja, with all of that gone.

I've thought for a long time about this. I've really, really thought about it. It's not just because it's who I am, but because for the longest time, I just didn't know who I was. I was being who the Green Ninja needed me to be, but when that was gone I was lost. And, after all this time, I always come to the same conclusion as to why I'm the Green Ninja.

I'm the Green Ninja, because I'm the only one that can be. It's not because of my destiny, or about what power I have. I'm the only person who could be the Green Ninja. Every time that something had happened, I'm the only one that could have been there to help. I'm the only one who could have faced my father that way. I'm the only one who could have gone up against the Overlord because of that. I'm the only one who could have saved Ninjago all the times that I had to. It's not because of destiny. It's because of me.

My dad told me that it wasn't the color of my gi that made me the Green Ninja, but the color of my heart. For a long time, I didn't know what he meant, but I'll never forget it. I don't know if I fully get it, but I know what I need to know. I know that he was saying that I wasn't the Green Ninja because I was destined to be. I'm the Green Ninja because that's who I am. I'm the Green Ninja because I'm Lloyd Garmadon.

It's my duty to protect Ninjago. No matter what happens to it, I have to protect it. I've shown the city that I'm the one that they can turn to when there's danger. I wasn't assigned with this duty. I chose this duty. I took it on myself to save the people. All of us did. The people know that the ninja are the ones that can save them. And I'm part of the ninja. We're the ones that will save Ninjago.

I know it won't be easy. I know that I may never be able to stop protecting the land. But if that's the case, then I'm ready for it. I have my friends by my side. I have Master Wu here to help me. I have all of the friends and allies we've made all over Ninjago. We've done so much for Ninjago, I know that when it comes time to help defend it, we'll have help to save it. I'm not someone who has to stand alone to save the people. I'm someone that can rely on everyone that's shown themselves ready to help me.

I know that Ninjago isn't a perfect place. I know that it's full of danger, of people that we've hurt, that I've hurt. I know now that not all of my actions are going to save everyone. I wasn't able to save Harumi. But that doesn't mean I stop fighting. No matter what happens, I'll always keep going. I'll keep raising my head. Even when everything gets taken from me, I know that I can still keep going. I'll keep fighting for the people that mean a lot to me.

I'll never forget the people that I've lost either. I'll never forget my father. I'll never let his memory leave me. I love my dad, I love him more than anyone else. Even if he's like this now, I'll never be able to forget the memories that we shared when he was my Sensei. I'll never let go of the hope that he and the other ninja have given me. I'll never forget what Morro showed me as to what it meant to be the Green Ninja. I'll never forget what Harumi did, and how she showed me how strong I really was, and what it meant to hurt because of my mistakes. I'll remember the people that tried to hurt me like Chen, Pythor and the Twins. No matter what, I won't forget them.

No matter what happens, I'll remember what I've learned as the Green Ninja, who I am as Lloyd. I'll remember what it means to fight with everything I have, to lose it all, to give everything to show others what is right.

No matter what happens, I'll never forget my friends, and what they've done for me.

No matter what happens, I'll always be the Green Ninja.

I am Lloyd Garmadon. And I am the Green Ninja.

"Transform? You've been doing it all your life."
" From the bratty child, to the destined Green Ninja, and now our great leader of the resistance."

"*Dance Lesson*"

Lora B

Soft music played through the Bounty, distracting Cole from the note he was writing. It had initially begun playing hours ago, but had started off so quiet it had barely registered in his mind. Now it was louder, bouncing around in his skull and chasing away the words he was trying to write. He tried to ignore it and continue his thoughts.

…After fifteen minutes though it became apparent that whoever was playing the music wasn't going to stop anytime soon.

Getting up from his desk he started to walk towards the sound, ready to give whoever was on the other end a piece of his mind.

As he got closer to the origin of the music he was able to make out what it was better. It sounded like… dance music?

Yeah that was definitely dance music. That explained why whoever put it on played it so loud - his dad always said that if you want to experience a type of music perfectly always remember that classical is played soft, dance is played loud.

That didn't mean he was happy about how loud they were being though, he was still going to ask them to turn it down a notch.

At last he approached the door to the room it was coming from.

He opened the door-

Only to watch as Jay collapsed onto the ground. Any thought of yelling about the sound vanished as he fell on one knee and checked on the other ninja. "Jay, are you alright?!"

"Oh… hey, Cole!" Jay waved weakly from his place on the floor. "You wanna join in on the fun?"

He moved his arm towards where Kai and Zane were before letting it fall back onto the wooden floor. The ice ninja and fire ninja were holding hands, spinning quickly around the room. Cole's attention was drawn back to Jay as he spoke again, "I'm gonna… join back in after a moment. The room's - it's spinning a lot right now."

"...What are you guys doing?"

"Dancing!" Zane responded as he continued to spin Kai around. After another moment he took his hands out of Kai's and turned to Cole, barely reacting as the red clad ninja fell to the ground with a thud. "Would you like to dance as well?"

"...I think I'm good. Also that doesn't really look like dancing."

"How is it not? We are moving to music. Isn't that what dancing is?"

"Dancing involves moving *with* the music not *to* it. Again thanks, but I'm good."

Kai stood up and shouted, "C'mon Cole! Don't - don't be a coward."

This proud declaration was broken slightly by him immediately falling back on the floor.

Cole felt a snicker break through as he walked over to Kai and helped him up, "I think that not wanting to pass out isn't cowardly, it's just smart."

"You're just scared to do it because we're clearly *Dancing Kings!*"

Another laugh broke through. "Like I said before, this is totally not dancing."

"Oh ye… yeah? Well then why don't you show us how to dance, oh Dance Master."

That… gave him pause. He hadn't danced in years, not since the Ninjago Talent competition, and before that not since he'd left home. Throughout the years since then he'd seen other ways to dance of course, but he hadn't joined in then. He had just… watched. It had been hard to even think about joining in, he had just run away from Marty Oppenheimer and still felt the embarrassment of messing up the Triple Tiger Sashay. After the talent show, well things had been rather… hectic. He had tried to dance alone maybe once or twice after that, however he had found it lacking somehow for lack of a better term. He just didn't feel the love and excitement his dad felt for the hobby.

But… maybe he'd be able to enjoy it more with them.

"...Alright." He grabbed Kai's hands and pulled him closer, "I'll show you guys how to dance, again."

Kai looked surprised for a moment… then he smiled, "Alright!"

Cole pulled him so they were face to face and listened to the music for a few moments, trying to find the beat to the song currently playing. Once he found it he slowly started to step in time with it. As he got used to it his footsteps became more sure and he started to lead Kai around the room. His movements did not move in the way his father would, slow and steady, perfect for a ballroom or on the stage with a group. Nor the way Kai was trying to, quick and excited like fire bouncing within a chiminea - a style more suited for a club.

He found his footsteps somewhere in the middle, moving just enough so to make sure he wasn't stepping on Kai's feet but not so quick that he lost the beat. He bounced to the beat, leading Kai around the room with his steps usually, but also letting Kai lead him occasionally. Their dance was a bit of give and take, Cole would move Kai around to the beat but would also allow Kai to lead him based on his inner beat. They danced to several songs like this.

At some point Jay and Zane had joined in too, moving in a similar way to how they were earlier. As they did Cole let a bit of his attention focus on the pair.

As he did so he realized that… they were actually dancing. Jay's movements were excitable, bouncy, fast like lighting strikes. Zane's steps were slower, more calculated, grounding the two's movements. They spun around still, but it was different. Unlike the spin he and Kai had been doing, similar to two halves of a top come together, it was clear that Zane was the center this time - spinning Jay around. While Zane was the center, Jay was using his body's weight to help them gain speed by basically throwing himself whichever way Zane spun them. It was... rather cool.

He decided to spin Kai around, not as Zane did, but how people would do during dances - bringing one hand up and twirling him. He did let him go a bit faster than most did though, just for fun.

And Kai responded to the twirl with laughter, his gi's colors melting with his hair - making Cole feel as though he was looking at a dancing flame, spinning under his hand.

He felt something pull at his hands.

Kai had grabbed onto his hands, pulling him over to him and attempting to spin him like Cole had done for him. The shorter man was only able to get him to spin once and though it wasn't as exciting as Kai's spin Cole found himself laughing in joy.

He felt… *excited*.

The moment was broken by two words.

"Watch out!" Kai tried to pull him towards himself-

Cole turned just in time to see Zane, spinning Jay again, coming closer to them.

To close-!

The pairs collided, throwing them into the ground in a messy pile.

For a moment, nothing happened.

No one moved.

No one made a sound.

Then, Cole started to laugh. And, like a dam had been broken, the other three soon started to laugh too.

They stayed like that until their laughter slowed, becoming breathless after the first few seconds. As their breath slowly returned Cole felt… surprisingly calm.

That night, while the other three slept, Cole found himself in front of the letter he had been writing once again.

And this time, his pen listened. 'Hey Dad, how are you doing…'

Ninjago City
Boutique
Grand Sensei
Dareth's
Dojo

10 YEARS
OF NINJAGO

ninjawhoa

K.I. CYBER

2020

NINJA

NEVER

QUIT!

"There comes a time when we all must grow up. When that time comes, it's important not to forget the lessons of our childhood. Because our childhood is the greatest training ground one will ever have."

~ Sensei Wu, Childs Play, S2EP5

We hope that the fanworks made you laugh, smile, cry, and just overall have a good time! The contributors and mod team have done their best work, and we hope our feelings of love and gratitude came across well.

Special shout-out to the Ninja team that let us feature their words and feelings in the zine! When revealed to the contributors, a lot of feelings were had (all positive of course)! We hope the readers had as fun a reaction as the contributors did, because it certainly is incredible.

The last few pages are the credits; all participants' names and social media handles will be listed, and the page number their work is on will be listed!

Thank you for enjoying the NNQ Fanzine. Stay safe, ninja.

~ NNQ Team

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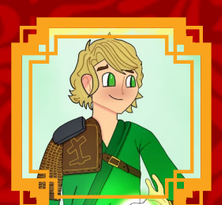

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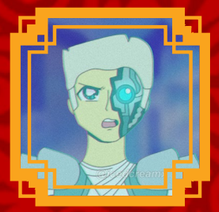

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“When The First Spinjitzu Master fought The Overlord...and his back was up against the wall, and he knew it was all over...Did he quit? No. He found a way to keep the fight going. He passed his elemental powers to us, of all people -- a bunch of kids! But there must have been a reason he chose us.

I’d like to think it’s because he knew we’d never back down, we’d never give up. We’ve learned the ancient ways of the ninja...

And *ninja never quit.*”

~ Lloyd Montgomery Garmadon

THE END